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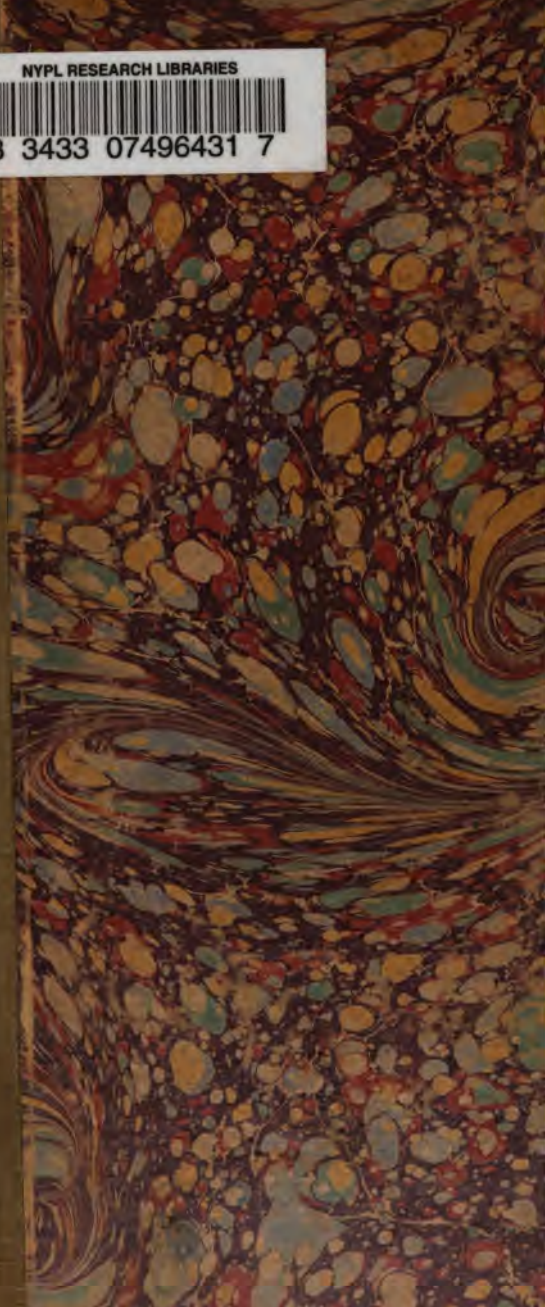
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THIRLBY HALL



THIRLBY HALL

A Novel

BY

W. E. NORRIS

AUTHOR OF 'MATRIMONY,' 'NO NEW THING,' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES

VOLUME I.

LONDON

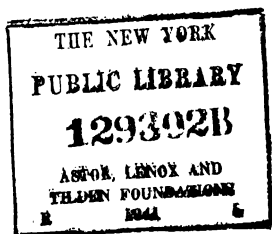
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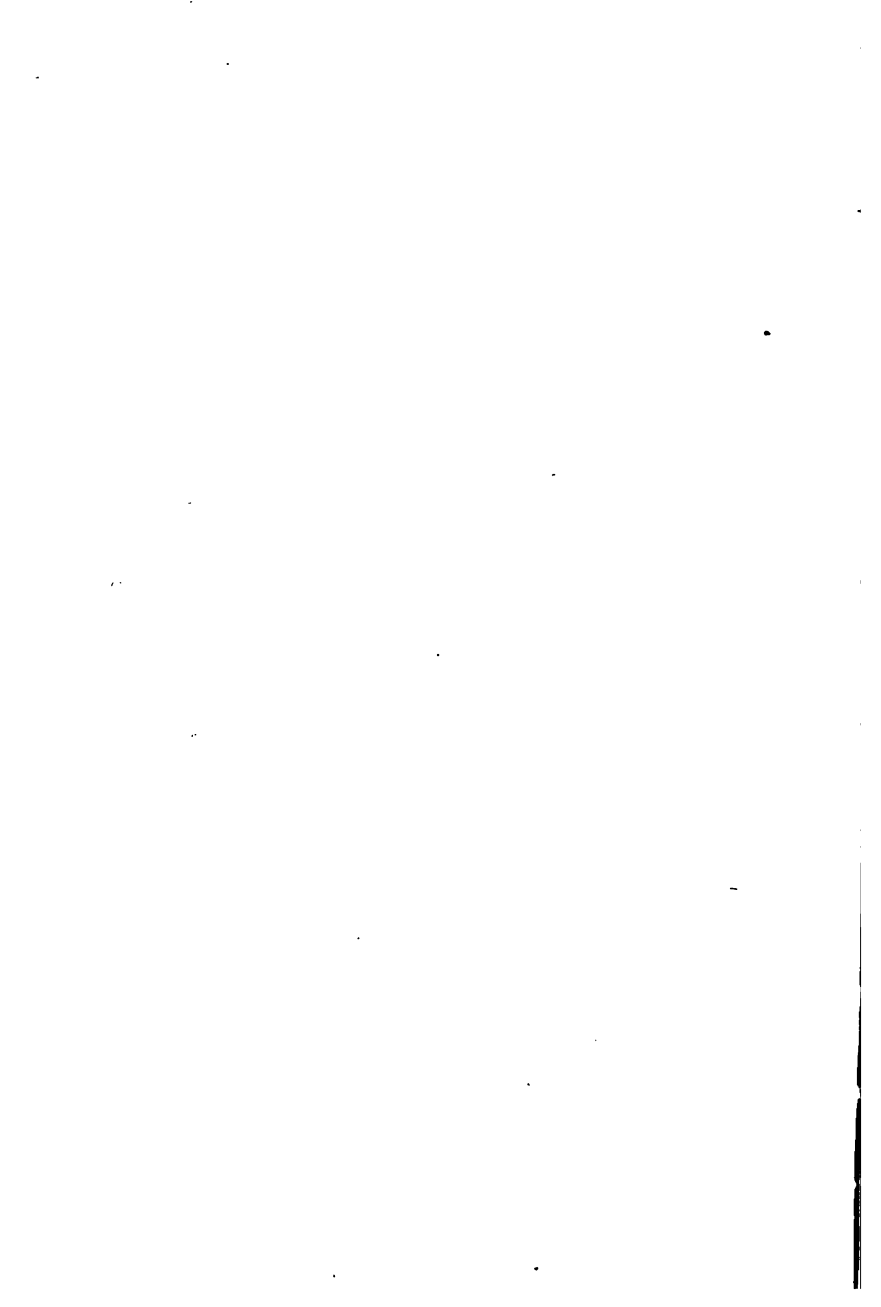
Mrs. Digby Collins

IN TOKEN OF A FRIENDSHIP WHICH ONLY INCREASES
AS YEARS GO ON.

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THIRLBY HALL.

CHAPTER I.

TEMPUS ACTUM.

WHEN I think of the early years of my life, I think of a wide green landscape, fertile, well-timbered, and swept always by fresh breezes from the German Ocean. I see great sheets of calm water reddened by the glow of sunset, and flights of wild-fowl in a black line against the sky, and the wherries, with their enormous brown sails, moving slowly along the dykes, and having, from a short distance, the appearance of sailing on dry land. I see an old red-brick house, too, with gables and twisted chimneys, standing in the midst of a perfectly level park. Round about it are shrubberies and a few flower-beds and an old-fashioned walled

Anticipation: while behind it there rises a slight — a very slight — eminence, which is called "the Hill" and from the summit whence thirty or fifty feet above the level of the sea (perhaps) many miles of land and water can be discovered stretching away to meet the horizon. There is a sense of space and vigour and freedom connected with this country which goes far towards making for its fitness, and is in some sort a substitute for beauty. So, at least, polite strangers were wont to affirm: but to my eyes it was always a beautiful country, and could stand very well upon its own merits, without need of any excuses or equivalents whatever.

A small number of years ago—sometimes it seems a great many, sometimes only a few—a little boy used to trot about that part of East Yorkshire in a state of constant and serene satisfaction with himself and his surroundings. He was, I think, what most people would consider a rather nice-looking little boy; and, as he was allowed to do almost exactly as he pleased and got very nearly everything that he wanted, it is not surprising that he should have been also a good-humoured and jolly little boy. I can see

him plainly now as he plods hither and thither on his sturdy little legs among the woods and fields. Sometimes he is alone; but more often he is accompanied by an elderly gentleman, with a slight stoop and a kind, handsome face, who does not say a great deal himself, but who listens with much courtesy to his companion's unceasing flow of conversation, and who only puts forward his own opinions from time to time with a proper degree of deference. These two are the best of friends, one of them being a great talker and the other an admirable listener; and whether they go their daily rounds on foot, or whether the old gentleman is mounted on a big-boned bay horse and the boy on a diminutive Shetland pony, they are quite happy together, and want no third person to enliven their solitude.

Third persons come, however, from time to time. There is another boy, George Warren, from Hailsham, and there is the Rector with his fishing-rod, and old Sir Digby Welby, who rides over to talk politics and agriculture. These come and go; but for the greater part of the long days the old man and the boy have no

society but their own, and are content therewith.

A few years later the little boy has become a big boy, and is more satisfied with himself than ever. His round jacket has been replaced by a shooting-coat; his legs are encased in leather gaiters and his feet in stout boots; he is out on the broads after duck, happy in the possession of a brand-new gun all of his own. With legitimate pride he eyes this weapon of destruction, while the punt in which he balances himself somewhat unsteadily is advancing among the tall reeds and rushes of the shore. All of a sudden the duck rise in a compact mass above the tops of the waving reeds. Bang!—right into the middle of them! Now, then, Dido, old girl, pick up the slain! Off goes Dido; off goes the impetuous youth after her, plunging deep into water and mud. How many killed? What! none? Well, well—better luck next time. The sportsman returns a little less quickly than he went; and there is old Jim Bunce, in his confounded old velveteens, sitting calmly in the punt, reloading with the aid of that forgotten implement called a ramrod; and Jim Bunce

widens his already wide mouth and says, "Lord! Mr. Chawls, who'd ha' thought it now!" when he hears the confession that has to be made; though perhaps he is not quite so surprised as his words would seem to imply. No matter, Jim Bunce—a day will come.

The day does come—many days. Days in the stubble and among the turnips; days in the coverts that lie about Thirlby Hall. The boy is now a young man, who can shoot as well as another; and if there are not a great many pheasants to be shot there are not a great many people to shoot them, while of partridges there are enough to satisfy anybody. Ah, dear old days, jolly old life, dear old country! Is it memory or time which has played such strange pranks with you?

I revisited those once familiar scenes the other day, after a long, long interval of absence—"a vast o' years," as old Jim Bunce would have said. It is not a beautiful country. I won't allow that it is ugly; but beautiful it certainly is not; and as I stood under the lee of Thirlby Church, looking out upon it all with sorrowful eyes, a furious east wind came tearing

round the angles of the old building, and chilled me to the very marrow of my bones. I am sure the wind never blew like that when I was young. As for the landscape—well, I was prepared for a certain degree of disappointment; for how could I expect that the reality should answer to my dim recollections when it is only by a vigorous effort that I can identify myself, the Charles Maxwell of A.D. 1883, with the slim young gentleman whose portrait in crayons hangs, or used to hang, in the library at Thirlby Hall? I say I was prepared for change; but what I was not prepared for was to find that the entire neighbourhood had shrunk to something less than a fourth of its original size. That Thirlby Broad! And Hickling Broad, and Horsey Mere—can those comparatively insignificant sheets of water be the vast inland seas upon which I used to sail by the hour together, and which my callow imagination likened to Lakes Erie, Michigan, and Superior? The villages, too, how they have huddled themselves together, and how sadly the woods have diminished in area! Even the Hall itself—but this is too painful. I turn my back upon the view, and look up at the gray,

weatherbeaten church tower above me, with its iron cage at the top which we used to call the lantern, and which served in ancient days as a lighthouse to ships out at sea. It is a tower of very respectable height; but alas, it is no longer to be compared, without palpable absurdity, to the Tower of Babel. And within the building things are not any better. Thirlby Church is a large church, as all the churches are in those parts, but it is not so large as York Minster—not nearly so large. I have difficulty in recognising it. The sea-green east window, against which I used to watch the flying shadows of the rooks during church time, is gone; so is the old three-decker; so are the high square pews. Renovation and restoration have resulted in stained glass and Minton tiles, and a reredos, and a marble pulpit, and rows of carved oak benches. These are improvements, no doubt; but I am sure I don't know what the old Rector would have thought of it all.

The old Rector and his old-fashioned ways have been forgotten for a long time, I should imagine. I saw his grave outside, among the graves of many others whom I saw last as hale,

hearty men. Under the chancel, in the family vault, sleeps the best friend I ever had. Perhaps it was rather a mistake to begin with the parish church when I stole away, without saying a word to anybody, to renew acquaintance with my old home.

As I pass out through the graveyard I come upon the last resting-place of another old friend :—

SACRED TO THE MEMORY

OF

JAMES BUNCE,

Born 3d August 1780 ; Died 10th December 1862.

For upwards of fifty years Keeper and Water-Bailiff to

BERNARD LE MARCHANT, OF THIRLBY HALL, ESQ.

A worthy man within this grave doth lie,
A faithful servant and a sportsman true ;
Ne'er failed with fish his master to supply,
Preserved his partridges and pheasants too.
Now in the heav'nly quires above he sings,
Removed from guns and rods and all such things.

Likewise of SUSANNAH, Wife of the Above.

Likewise of his Sons JAMES and WILLUM,
Drowned at Sea.

This Here Stone
Was put up by his third son, Daniel Bunce,
Carpenter and Shipwright of Great Yarmouth.

There is some internal evidence of "this here stone" having been literally put up by the afore-said Daniel—put up, that is, by his own hands; and, indeed, if he inherits his father's qualities, he is not the man to call in professional aid over so small a matter as the cutting of a tombstone, or even the composing of a suitable epitaph to adorn the same. Old Jim Bunce used to be fond of saying of himself that he was a Jack-of-all-trades. He would sometimes add modestly that he was master of none; but this, I take it, he said only to secure the harmless satisfaction of being contradicted. If ever any one knew his own value, as a person of many shifts and large experience, Jim Bunce did; and he was only a gamekeeper because his tastes inclined him towards field-sports, not because he doubted his capacity to fill any other station in the world that he might select. I well remember how he would insist upon painting his own garden fence, mending his own roof and windows, and making his own nets. I remember also that he always received the full market value of such odd jobs from my uncle, who would justly remark that it would be most unfair to take

advantage of Bunce's economy. It would not surprise me to hear that Daniel Bunce, carpenter and shipwright of Great Yarmouth, had got the price of that gravestone out of the trustees.

And so Jim Bunce has left his velveteens, his rod, and gun, and "all such things," and is singing in heavenly quires, is he? It may be so; but I must be allowed to reserve my opinion. I fancy that, if Bunce has kept his consciousness and his identity at all, he is not content with the employment so confidently ascribed to him by his son. Daniel, to be sure, may reply that he knows quite as much about the matter as I do. How, indeed, can we say what change may come over the spirit of a man after death, when we are daily witnesses of the vicissitudes to which it is subject while still imprisoned in the flesh? Of all the hard laws which govern us poor mortals, and mould us without the smallest respect for the sacredness of our free-will, the law of change is the saddest and most puzzling. It is not that a man develops into a better edition of his former self, that his intelligence widens and his knowledge and experience increase; but that

he becomes another man altogether. One thinks of the ambitions, the passions, the struggles of twenty, thirty, forty years ago, asking one's self with a sort of stupid wonder: Was it really *I* who did and suffered all these things? One can't look back faithfully and minutely into the past without humiliation, without a sense of infidelity and powerlessness. I speak, of course, of myself, and judge humanity at large by myself (which is, I imagine, the common method); but as it is the story of my own life that I am about to write, perhaps a little preliminary egotism may be forgiven me.

I suppose that my childhood was as happy a one as could possibly be. I don't think that the fact of my being an orphan afflicted me for a single moment. My parents died when I was far too young to understand my loss, and my Uncle Bernard was father, mother, and friend all in one to me. I have a portrait of him—a mere pencil-sketch of his profile, dashed off, one afternoon, by George Warren, who had a happy knack of catching likenesses—which I am glad to say that I have preserved ever since, and which recalls him to my mind far more vividly

than the full-length oil-painting by Sir Francis Grant. My drawing represents a handsome, refined-looking man, slightly bald, whose age might be anything between forty and sixty. The forehead is broad and rather high, the nose aquiline, the upper lip short, and the chin round and well-moulded. There is a suspicion of a smile about the mouth and the eye, which last is half-closed, and has a faint crow's-foot at the corner. A very deep line runs from the nostril to the corner of the mouth. Knowing all that I do now, I can see that it is a sad face; though it never struck me as sad in those days, there being, in my opinion, no reason at all why it should be so. I was aware, of course, that Uncle Bernard was a widower; but it did not occur to me as possible that he could be still grieving for my aunt, a person whom I had never seen, and who was as dead as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Afterwards I heard that the subject of his wife's death was one which not even his most intimate friends ventured to mention to him, and that he had had other heavy sorrows besides this, which also—though for different reasons—could not be spoken of in

his presence. For the rest, my dear old man was far too unselfish and too philosophical to obtrude his troubles upon those who could not enter into them—or, for that matter, upon those who could. I call him “old” out of habit, and because, in the days of my puppyhood, he naturally appeared to me to be quite an old man; but he was not in reality much beyond middle age at that time, and his mother was still alive, and even very much alive.

Of that lady we saw nothing, and heard very little. She had contracted a second marriage before my birth, and lived far away in the north of Scotland with her husband, a certain Mr. Farquhar. Thither my uncle used to betake himself once in every year upon a filial visit, and, as he always looked tired and harassed on his return, I was led to form a poor opinion of my great-aunt, who never came to Thirlby.

Thirlby, in truth, was a house where guests were few. Not that my uncle was inhospitable; but it so happened that there were scarcely half a dozen people in the world whom he was expected to ask to stay with him. We were singularly devoid of near relations, he and I.

He was only my uncle by marriage, his wife having been my mother's sister, and my own people must have been as much astonished as delighted when he proposed to adopt me. I believe they made rather a favour of acceding to his wish; but I am bound to say that, having brought themselves to do so, they allowed him entire liberty of action with regard to my education and destiny, and if he had thought fit to employ me in a coal-mine, or send me to sea as a cabin-boy, I very much doubt whether they would have felt themselves justified in interfering in the matter. But he did nothing of that kind. He treated me in all respects like his own son—only I think that our companionship was somewhat closer than that which subsists between most fathers and sons; and so we lived together in the old house, which to one of us, at all events, never seemed empty or lonely, and it was very seldom that a visitor interrupted our prolonged *tête-à-tête*.

As for ladies, scarcely one did we see from January to December, and really it is wonderful how well we got on without them. Mr. Dennison, the Rector, was a widower; Lady

Welby was an invalid ; Mrs. Warren of Hailsham was understood to have every moment of her time occupied in ministering to the wants of a boundless family, and in endeavouring to reconcile these with the capacities of a far from boundless income. Other ladies there were, living, some five, some seven, some ten miles away from us ; but our intercourse with them was confined to a few formal calls in the course of the year. My uncle was too conscientious a man to say "Not at home" when he was at home, or even to slip quietly out of doors as soon as a carriage was seen approaching across the great level park. Therefore he received these ladies as often as they came with gentleness and courtesy ; but he did not encourage any advances towards intimacy on their part. I believe that, long before, some of them had caused him great annoyance by asserting that it was a duty that he owed to society to provide his house with a new mistress, and by throwing eligible persons in his way ; the result of which was that he took up an attitude of distrust and self-defence before them which the lapse of years had not availed to modify. As for me, no sooner

did I detect a green or yellow chariot swinging slowly up the avenue than I bolted away as fast as my legs could carry me. I did not like female society in those days. Whether we were ultimately the better or the worse for being thus deprived of what neither of us missed, I will not pretend to say—a little of both, perhaps.

From time to time my uncle's brother, the General, would run down to Thirlby for a few days; and those were merry days for the whole establishment. I am afraid the servants liked the General a little better than they did my uncle. He was not more open-handed, for no one could very well have been that; but he was certainly jollier. Tall, erect, good-looking, and carrying his five-and-forty years with a certain youthful jauntiness, he was a man with whom the world had always gone well, and whom the world accordingly loved. No doubt it was to his own merits that he owed his C.B. and his attainment of the rank of Major-General at so early an age; still it is not every meritorious officer who has a chance of distinguishing himself, and insomuch as General Le Marchant had

had many such chances, he may be said to have been used well by the world. It was, therefore, as natural that everybody should like him as that he should be good-humoured, jovial, and full of jokes, which, if not intrinsically excellent, were made so by the manner of their delivery. Cooper, the butler, ordinarily a somewhat saturnine personage, would stand behind my uncle's chair, grinning from ear to ear, while that capital story was being narrated about the troop-sergeant-major's horse which was cast by mistake and purchased by the Bishop of Ciren-cester, who afterwards exhibited it proudly to the colonel of the regiment. The narrator chuckled so prodigiously over it himself that his audience could not choose but be infected by his hilarity. As for Jim Bunce, he declared it did his heart good to go out for a day's shooting with a gentleman as took a real delight in his work. The truth is that my uncle, though a very fair shot, was no enthusiastic lover of sport, and would rather, any day, see his brother bring down a rocketeer or the Rector land a twenty-pound pike than be at the pains of performing either of these feats himself. It was

the General who gave me my first gun ; it was the General who carried me off to London while I was yet of tender years, "to open my mind," as he said ; and who took me to Madame Tussaud's and the Zoological Gardens, and—most glorious of all—to the play. Somehow, I can never quite bring myself to believe that the General is dead ; though it seems natural enough that so many others should be.

The history of a man's life is like the history of a nation ; looking back into it, one finds it marked out into certain clearly-defined epochs. An event, great or small, takes place here and there and makes a full stop ; after which a fresh period has to be opened. One does not always recognise the full stop at the moment of its occurrence ; but when so much that preceded and followed it has been swept out of the ken of memory it stands forth with sufficient distinctness. The first period of my life ended, where the first period of most boys' lives ends, on the day when I was sent to school. Full well do I remember that sad and solemn occasion. My uncle and I drove the whole distance, the establishment for which I was bound being only

some thirty miles away from Thirlby, and I recollect that we were both extremely self-possessed and *nonchalant* in our manner; only towards the end of the journey conversation would flag a little, in spite of all our efforts. And then the schoolmaster came out, all geniality and affability, to shake hands with us, and soon afterwards my uncle went away. I feel an inward sinking even now when I think of that terrible moment. But the schoolmaster, still genial (for, indeed, it was the first day of term, and parents were arriving at every moment), patted me on the shoulder encouragingly, and said, "Now, my little fellow, you must not pull a long face. And here is Warren, an old friend of yours, and a big boy, who will take care that nobody eats you up."

Dear old George Warren! I dare say he saved me a licking or two during those first few days, though I do not remember that I was in much danger of being eaten up, then or afterwards, by any one, unless it were by the schoolmaster himself, from whose fierce indignation no boy, however big, could have shielded me. George was four years older than I; but, in

spite of this great disparity of age, we had been friends at home, and in spite of it we remained friends, not only throughout our schooldays, but long after our schooldays were at an end. I attribute this partly to George's native modesty, and partly to the circumstance that during the greater part of our boyhood we met only in the holidays. Had we been at Eton together we could hardly, I think, have continued to associate upon terms of equality; but Mr. Warren, who was a poor man with many children, entered his son at a less expensive and famous public school than Eton, and my removal thither in due course of time gave me a certain prestige in my intercourse with George, of which I fear that I was only too ready to take advantage.

But, great as was the change from that dreary little private school to Eton, and important as it seemed at the time, it does not now strike me as marking the commencement of a fresh period in my career. To reach a genuine full stop I have to advance several years, to the time when I was nearly eighteen, and the afternoon on which Maud Dennison returned to her father's house.

Maud Dennison and I had been companions as children, and had climbed trees together, and together had caught many a perch and bream in the Broads. She was at that time, as I often remarked to George Warren, "almost as good as a boy;" and the Rector was more than once heard to say, with a sigh, that he wished it had pleased Providence to create her of the other sex. Much as he loved his little girl, it came to him, no doubt, as a relief when his sister, Mrs. Saville, a lady of some wealth and position in society, who had girls of her own, proposed to take Maud, and keep her with her cousins until her education should be completed. The offer was, at any rate, accepted. Maud and I parted—not without tears upon both sides—and forgot one another with the celerity natural to our age. I suppose it was found more convenient that the Rector should run up occasionally to London or to his sister's place in Surrey than that his daughter should spend her holidays at Thirlby, for to Thirlby she came no more; and the chances are that Norfolk would never have been gladdened by the sight of her again but for

the sudden demise of the Rector's housekeeper. This melancholy event deprived poor Mr. Dennison of his right hand, and almost of his head into the bargain. He had a right hand of his own equal to any man's for the tying of flies, and he had a head upon his shoulders which was tolerably well stocked with brains ; but, as regarded the details of every-day life, he was as helpless as an infant. To order his dinner was a task altogether beyond him ; nor could he find his sermons, his memoranda, his surplice, his boots, or his hat without assistance. Hence he spent some weeks of hopeless misery and bewilderment, and committed blunders in the discharge of his duties which were talked about all over the parish, before it occurred to him that he had a daughter who had attained, or nearly attained, years of discretion. Long afterwards Mrs. Saville described to me how she was sitting in her drawing-room in Portman Square one morning when the Rector rushed in, excited and dishevelled, to say that he was very sorry to upset existing arrangements, but that, unless he was allowed to take Maud home, he believed, upon his honour and conscience, that

he should be driven into marrying the housemaid. "What was I to do?" Mrs. Saville asked. "I had fully intended to keep the dear child until she married well—as she would have been quite certain to do within a few years—but, knowing what a simpleton my poor brother was, and how easy it would be for any unscrupulous woman to lead him into making a fool of himself, I simply dared not raise objections. I was sorry for Maud; but I felt that there was no help for it, and that she must go."

So the Rector—who, by the way, was anything but a simpleton—carried off his daughter from the pomps and vanities of the metropolis; and thus it came to pass that, as I was walking homewards one evening, I was struck dumb with amazement by encountering at the corner of a lane a young lady of the most surpassing beauty and elegance. I have already mentioned that feminine charms were wholly unknown to me during the early years of my life; and although at this time I had a pretty high opinion of myself—being in the Eton Eight, and being possessed of advantages of face and

figure of which I was fully conscious—I was apt to be bashful when ladies looked at me, and I felt myself growing red under the calm scrutiny of this one.

I don't know that I can describe her. In fact, I am quite sure that I cannot; though some attempt at description is doubtless necessary. She was slim, and of something less than middle height; she had a low, broad forehead, and an abundance of brown hair above it; but what struck you first of all in looking at her was her eyes. These were shaded by remarkably long lashes, and were of that soft gray colour which has no suspicion of blue or green in it, and which is, to my mind, the most beautiful of all the hues which human eyes can possess. With such eyes as that, it really could not signify at all what her nose and mouth might be like, and I don't think I noticed them at the time. Subsequent familiarity with all the features of this lady's face enables me to state that the former was short and straight, and that the latter was rather too large for the then received ideas of beauty. It would not, I believe, be considered so now-a-days. She deliberately took stock of my person,

and then extended her hand to me with a smile, saying, "I think you must be Charley Maxwell. I am Maud Dennison, if you remember such a person."

I made a clutch at my hat with my left hand and held out my right, not to take hers, but to show that circumstances made it impossible for me to do so. I said, "Oh, how do you do, Miss Dennison?" (I did not venture to call her Maud, though she had addressed me as Charley.) "I'm afraid I can't shake hands. The fact is, I've been mending the bottom of the old punt; and I've got myself into an awful muddy mess, as you see."

If I am to confess the truth, I was not a little vexed that she should have discovered me in such an unbecoming plight, and was uncomfortably aware that my coat and trousers were the oldest in my possession. However, she laid her little hand in mine without any hesitation, remarking quietly that the mud would wash off;—and, as she did so, I became aware that, for the first time in my life, I had fallen in love.

Sudden, no doubt; but not so very much more sudden, perhaps, than that kind of thing

generally is. My admiration was so great that I should certainly have given some sort of verbal expression to it, had not my shyness been even greater. But presently she caused all my shyness, and I fear a large part of my admiration also, to evaporate by observing, "You are very much grown."

"As far as that goes, so are you, you know," I returned, rather tartly. In truth, if she had searched for a month, she could hardly have discovered a form of criticism more calculated to annoy me.

"Oh, yes," she said; "I have grown a great deal, of course—in fact, I am grown-up now. You are not quite that yet."

"I'm seven months older than you are, at all events," I retorted.

"Still," said she, "that does not make you grown-up. You are a boy, whereas I am a young woman. I am sure you must see that yourself."

I replied that I didn't see it at all.

"Ah, I think you do, or you would not have called me 'Miss Dennison' just now. But we won't quarrel over it," she added, after a short pause.

I explained to her that she was under a total misapprehension. One was obliged to be a little careful, because some people became so awfully stuck-up after living in London that there was no knowing whether the slightest familiarity might not offend them. I had only addressed her as Miss Dennison out of politeness.

“Or because you had forgotten my Christian name?” she suggested. “Have you forgotten teaching me to climb trees, I wonder? And don’t you remember our fishing expeditions, and the day when I was frightened out of my wits by catching a huge eel? You wouldn’t take it off the hook for me, and I had to drag it along the ground for ever so far at the end of my line, till I met George Warren, who relieved me of the monster. Don’t be cross and disagreeable, Charley, or I shall think that it is you who have grown stuck-up at Eton.”

This was quite irresistible. My offended dignity was soothed, and I once more realised that I was desperately in love with this new and exquisite Maud Dennison—a fact as to which I had begun to entertain some doubts during the past few minutes.

"And have you come home for good?" I inquired:

"Oh, I suppose so," she answered. "My father has discovered at last that he wants me, and I hope that he will always find me necessary now. We must try to become friends again, you and I, as we are to be such near neighbours."

No great effort was needed in order to arrive at this result. We walked on together, talking over old times and comparing notes, and I was not a little disgusted when the Rector came hurrying along the lane—the Rector was always in a hurry—and caught us up.

"So there you are, Maud!" he called out; "I've been looking for you all over the place. Come along, my dear child, we must get home as quickly as possible, or I shall have to go without any dinner. Well, Charley, here's your old playmate back again, you see—did you tell Bunce about those rascally poachers? They don't belong to this parish, thank God!—your old playmate back again. No time for play this evening, though. Maud has got her work cut out for her. My junior curate, I call her—my

junior curate. Not but what she ought to take rank of poor Tomkinson, upon my word. Dear good fellow, Tomkinson; but no head for business—no head whatever.”

The Rector bustled on, talking as he went, and Maud paused to wish me good-night.

“Good-night, Maud—may I really call you Maud, then?” I asked, in my most insinuating manner.

She laughed, and looked full at me with her frank gray eyes. “What else should you call me?”

And then she was gone, and I took my way homewards, a changed and exultant creature. I will not make the absurd assertion that I did not sleep at all that night; but I do believe that I lay awake for quite an hour, thinking of Maud.





CHAPTER II.

BUNCE IS INDISCREET.

THE dining-room at Thirlby was by far the most imposing room in the house. With its oak paneling, its family portraits, its antlers, and its high carved chimney-piece, for which a fashionable lady of the present day would be ready to give any amount of money, it was worthy to take rank with anything of the kind in the county, and we were justly proud of it. It was, however, a draughty room at the best of times, and a disagreeably vast one for two people to sit down to dinner in ; therefore, when the weather was cold, and we had nobody staying with us, my uncle and I used to dine together cosily in the library. A table was wheeled in while we were dressing, and when we came down, there it was, ready laid, within comfortable distance of the fire ; the claret stood in the fender, the coals and logs made a

cheerful blaze ; and Cooper, the butler, was waiting in all the dignity of office to remove the cover from the soup-tureen.

Cooper did not approve of this practice, which he considered a slovenly and unworthy one, and, being an old servant, he made no secret of his disapproval ; but he was brought to countenance it—as a purely temporary arrangement—when it was pointed out to him that my uncle, who always suffered a great deal from the cold, could not dine in the larger room without risk of injury to his health. “Dinner will be in the libery this evening, sir,” Cooper would inform me day after day with a perfectly grave face, “as Mr. Le Marchant is not feeling quite the thing.” The repetition of this phrase eased his mind, and marked the protest which he felt bound to enter against any disturbance of established custom.

He went through the usual form on that spring afternoon which was made for ever memorable to me by my encounter with Maud Dennison, and which was indeed as good an imitation of a winter afternoon as could be desired—spring being a season practically unknown in East Norfolk.

“ Was the Rector here to-day, Cooper ? ” I inquired.

“ He was, sir ; and he left a bundle of manuscript and two right ’and gloves behind him.”

“ And—er—Miss Dennison ? ” I continued, asking the question for the mere satisfaction of mentioning her name.

“ Miss Dennison was here likewise, sir. Should we send a lad down with the papers and gloves ? ”

“ Yes, I suppose so. Or rather, no ; I’ll walk down with them myself after dinner.”

It was, I believe, the great ambition of Cooper’s life to acquire that impassive demeanour which characterises the more fashionable members of his profession ; and by unremitting diligence and study of the few good models who came in his way, he had schooled himself into a very fair imitation of the *nil admirari* type of London butler ; but Nature will prove too strong for the best of us sometimes, and when he heard me express my intention of doing this very unusual thing, he so far forgot himself as to burst into a short laugh.

“ I don’t know why you should laugh, Cooper,”

I said. "I suppose you think I want to go down to the Rectory in order to see Miss Dennison."

"I beg your pardon, sir," said the abashed Cooper.

"Well, you're perfectly right; that was my reason. Though, on second thoughts, I don't know that I will turn out in the cold to-night. Miss Dennison and I used to be like brother and sister, and of course I am anxious to have a talk with her. There's nothing to grin at in that."

"Nothing at all, sir."

"And you needn't take it into your head that I'm in love with every young lady whom I speak to."

"Oh dear no, sir," answered Cooper. "I hope you won't have no troubles of that kind for a many years to come. You're too young, sir, to think of such things yet, if you'll excuse my saying so. Time enough for that when you leave school, sir."

And with this observation—which, I need hardly say, offended me far more than his laugh had done—Cooper withdrew.

When I went down to the library I found my uncle turning over the leaves of an old book with

an amused smile on his face. "The Rector has been up to London," he said; "and see what he has brought me back. The dear old fellow must have taken a great deal of trouble about it."

My uncle was a bit of a bibliomaniac, and his love for rare editions was well known to his friends. I examined the little pile of brown volumes that lay on the table at his elbow. There was a "Hudibras" among them, I remember, and a dilapidated "Fool of Quality." "They look awfully old," I remarked. "I suppose they're worth a lot of money."

"Well, no," answered my uncle, laughing outright. "To tell you the truth, they are worth very little in a pecuniary sense. But the value of a gift doesn't depend upon what it will fetch you know; and the Rector, I suppose, thought as you do, that they were 'awfully old.' Don't let him suspect that they are anything but pearls of great price. By the way, he has brought something really rare back with him in the person of Miss Maud, who has developed into one of the loveliest girls I ever beheld."

"I know she has," said I, nodding. "I met her this afternoon down by the Broad."

"You did, did you? Charley, my boy, you must beware of Cupid's darts. Upon my word, when I saw her to-day, I felt sincerely thankful that you were still only a school-boy."

It was really too bad to be reminded of that humiliating fact twice within the course of half an hour. "I am in Upper Division, you know," I could not help saying.

"Yes, very true. Still you have not left school yet."

"But why should you be thankful for that, Uncle Bernard?"

"When you are my age, and have sons of your own, you will know why," answered my uncle. And then we sat down to dinner, and spoke no more of Maud Dennison.

That I thought of her all the time that we were talking about the lateness of the season, the disgraceful condition of the roads, and other similar topics of interest, was a matter of course; but I kept my thoughts to myself, and it was not until the dessert was upon the table that I remarked in an off-hand manner, "I was thinking that I would just stroll over to the Rectory

presently. Mr. Dennison has left some things behind him, as usual."

It was quite true that the Rector, who was one of the most absent-minded men that ever lived, rarely paid us a visit without forgetting to take away something that he had brought with him; but I was uncomfortably conscious that never before had I proposed to restore his property to him in person. My uncle, however, neither laughed nor made any comment upon my announcement, beyond the pardonable one that it was rather cold for evening walks. But by-and-by he disconcerted me very much by saying musingly,

"I suppose we may take it for granted that you will lose your heart to this pretty Miss Maud; but, after all, that will do nobody any harm."

"I don't know why anything of the sort should be taken for granted," returned I, rather annoyed that a matter of so much importance should be so lightly treated; "but if it did happen——"

"What if it did?"

"Why, if it did, I think it might easily do

me a great deal of harm. That is, if she refused me."

"Oh," said my uncle, "I imagine that there is very little fear of that."

"What do you mean?" I asked, surprised and flattered by this confident expression of opinion.

"Well, you see, Charley, I take it that, by the time that you are of an age, and in a position, to make proposals of marriage to any lady, Miss Dennison will be Mrs. Somebody-else and the mother of several children. Besides which, you will probably have fallen in love with many other people before then. I don't mean to sneer at your feelings or your strength of purpose, my dear fellow," added my uncle hastily; "I am only assuming that you are like myself and everybody else. Which is an excusable assumption, you will allow."

I did not, of course, think that I resembled everybody else, but I let it be inferred that such might be the case; and my uncle went on to point out that young men who had to make their own way in the world were usually very fortunate if they could begin to contemplate matrimony

about the age of thirty. That I was one of the class of young men alluded to had always been an understood thing. In the course of nature it seemed probable that I should some day be the owner of Thirlby ; but my uncle had never said that he intended to make me his heir, nor had I any right to expect that he should do so. The General undoubtedly had a prior claim, and there was no reason at all why the General should not marry and have sons of his own. Nevertheless, I was generally treated as though I had been the heir, and my private impression was that I should only be expected to earn my own living until the day when I should be called upon to enter into my inheritance. It was my earnest and honest wish that that day might be very far distant. I was young enough to regard death as a remote contingency, so far as those whom I loved were concerned ; young enough also to trouble my head very little about the future or the choice of a profession ; young enough, finally, to be over head and ears in love with Maud Dennison, and to be free from any harassing sense of the responsibilities attaching to that condition. What makes love's young dream so

sweet is that it is so thoroughly and delightfully selfish.

After what my uncle had said, I thought I would not go down to the Rectory that evening, but I went on the following morning, and from then to the end of the holidays—only a poor three weeks, alas!—not a day passed without my spending several hours with Maud. We soon became close and intimate friends, but I did not know then, and do not know now, whether she suspected the existence of any warmer feeling than friendship on my part. She treated me like a younger brother, and with that I was fain to be content. I was an innocent and inexperienced youth. There must have been a good deal of timidity mixed up with my boyish vanity, a considerable amount of awe and respect underlying the easy familiarity with which I was accustomed to approach my lovely neighbour. I remember thinking that I had done quite a bold and significant thing when I presented her with a fox-terrier pup, and it was not without blushing up to the roots of my hair that I ventured to ask her for a flower out of the Rectory garden on the last day before my return to Eton. She granted

my request at once, laughing, and begging me to take my choice, and I chose a forget-me-not, which made her laugh the more. And I shouldn't wonder if I still had the same forget-me-not in a box of mine which contains certain objects of value. But, to tell the truth, I have not looked into that box for some little time. What should I find if I were to open it? Dust and ashes, nothing more; withered flowers, scraps of ribbon—I don't know what odds and ends of rubbish—which would say nothing to me. Let a man's memory be never so good, the utmost it can do for him is to retain facts; it cannot hold emotions. It is but a dim and colourless landscape that one looks back upon; the slow waves of Lethe have more than half submerged it, and the vacant spaces have to be filled up by imagination. While I was wandering round about Thirlby, the other day, in a would-be sentimental mood, I tried hard to experience the sensation of mingled pleasure and pain and regret which I always fancied would come to me when I saw the old place again; but the fact was that I was thinking more about the east wind than about anything else all the time. It is the misery of humanity that we

live for so few years, and cannot remain the same even for a little part of that little space. And yet—

“Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle’s compass come.”

Let us acknowledge with thankfulness that something remains to us, although, after the first stages of our brief journey, we are always losing more than we gain, and the freshness and glory of life vanish so soon.

During the period which I am endeavouring to recall (and over which I fear I may be lingering too long for the reader’s patience) life was very fresh and glorious to me. It may be, and I have no doubt it is, an extremely fine thing to be Prime Minister, or Lord Chancellor, or Archbishop of Canterbury; but I think that all reflective persons will agree with me that, for unalloyed gratification of personal ambition, to be Captain of the Boats is better. My last summer half at Eton would have been saddened by reason of my approaching resignation of that proud office, if I had not been in rather a hurry to get on to Oxford and become a man. My uncle, yielding to my entreaties, came down on

the Fourth of June, and brought the Rector and Maud with him ; and if they did not admire me in the fantastic nautical costume which tradition ordered us to wear on that occasion, they must have been less appreciative people than I took them for. We had a brilliant and delightful day. Indeed, I should be almost inclined to say that that Fourth of June was the happiest day of my whole life, only that one must really be a little cautious about what one commits to print, and there are persons living who might not take such a statement in good part.

When I arrived at Thirlby in the beginning of August, bearing my sheaves, in the shape of a large box full of leaving-books, with me, I was met at the station by George Warren, who had then been about two years at Oxford, and had acquired all the privileges and adjuncts of manhood, including a pair of whiskers. I never had any secrets from George, and I determined to let him know at once how irrevocably my affections were engaged, in order to prevent any possible complications from arising in the future. Certainly it would have been a tolerably cool piece of presumption on the part of poor old

George to raise his eyes to the loveliest of her sex, but the extreme improbability that any one, however unworthy, could see Maud without falling in love with her had also to be taken into consideration ; and so, while we drove along the dusty roads and lanes, I told my love tale as well as the brown mare, who was almost pulling my arms out of their sockets, would let me.

“Rather quick work, isn’t it?” was George’s comment, after I had come to the end of my narrative. George was a man of few words.

“That sort of thing always is,” I answered.

“Is it? Well—I don’t know, I’m sure.”

Here I burst out laughing ; for this was one of George’s stock phrases, and not all the chaff of his friends had ever been able to break him of falling back upon it when he had not yet made up his mind as to all the bearings of a matter under consideration. It generally took George some little time to make up his mind. He was a thick-set young man of about middle height, with dark brown hair and eyes, and a broad, homely countenance which no one could have called good-looking, yet which was certainly not ugly. A solid Briton, in short, whose mind

moved slowly, but who was by no means lacking in intelligence. That formula of his, "I don't know, I'm sure," was thoroughly characteristic of him. It could be made to bear a variety of meanings according to circumstances; upon the present occasion I understood it to imply a certain degree of mild disapproval.

"My dear fellow," I said, "if you had seen her you would not be surprised——"

"Oh, but I have seen her," he interrupted, quietly.

"You have? Why in the world didn't you say so before? Well?"

"Well; she is certainly very pretty."

"I should rather think she was! Anybody could see that with half an eye. But she is a great deal more than pretty. Surely you must have found that out if you spoke to her at all."

"I thought her very pleasant."

"Very pretty!—very pleasant!" I repeated impatiently. "You are the best fellow in the world, George; but you haven't a spark of romance or imagination in you."

"I suppose not."

"I told you about this, you know, because I

was half afraid that you might fall in love with her yourself, and I thought it only fair to—to——”

“To warn me off. Thank you, Charley; that was very thoughtful of you,” said George, who sometimes permitted himself a touch of gentle irony.

“But really I don’t think it was necessary.”

“No. You see, Charley, it is just as well for me that I happen to be unromantic and unimaginative; for I couldn’t afford to fall in love with people just because they were pretty and pleasant. If I am lucky I may be getting enough briefs by the time that I am five-and-forty to justify me in noticing the fact that there are women in the world; but for a great many years to come I shall have to ignore them. Unless, indeed, some fascinating heiress should throw herself at my head.”

The idea of such a piece of good fortune happening to homely old George was so funny that it sent me off into another fit of laughter, in which he joined quite good-humouredly. George Warren was the eldest of a very large family—of a family so large that his father was wholly

unable to make distinctions between him and his younger brethren. It was believed that, after Mr. Warren's death, Hailsham would have to be sold, and that the amount of personal property to be divided among his children would be very modest. George had been originally destined for the Church, there being a family living which might have afforded a tolerably comfortable provision for him ; but, after careful consideration, he had found that Art. XVII. was too hard a nut for him to crack ; and so, as soon as his university career should be completed, he was to try what he could do for himself at the Bar, while the living was to be held in reserve for some younger, and possibly less scrupulous, member of the flock. I have often wondered what made me and George such fast friends ; for we had little in common beyond a common love for certain out-door games and sports ; but friends we were. I liked him, as every one who knew him must have liked him, feeling him to be true to the backbone, and that he would stick by his friends through thick and thin ; but I neither understood nor appreciated him at his right value in those days. He, I imagine,

understood me perfectly ; but that, perhaps, was not a very difficult thing to do.

Even after the passing of so many years, and after all that they have brought and taken away, I cannot think of that happy, irresponsible summer-time at Thirlby without a perceptible tightening of my elderly heartstrings. The world was young then ; the sun was a great deal warmer and brighter than it is now ; the woods and the sea and the broad glassy meres had a joyous beauty which it would be quite absurd to expect that they should have retained, and which, as a matter of fact, they have not retained. There are certain spots in that very unromantic county of Norfolk which will always be associated in my mind with the Garden of Eden ; there are certain people of whom I shall always think with tenderness, and who, if they were living still, would be very much surprised to hear that the sound of their names raised a sentimental echo in my breast. I need hardly say that it is not on account of their virtues (which may or may not have been conspicuous) that I remember them ; but because they form a dim background to that passing scene.

existence—because the current of their lives chanced to flow parallel to ours during those delightful weeks. I cannot explain the wonderful transformation which had come over all common and familiar persons and things with Maud Dennison's advent; nor could any one understand it who has not passed through a similar experience. As, however, nine people out of ten have a personal acquaintance with the phenomenon, this inability of mine is of no great consequence. Still, I cannot allow every Jack to run away with the idea that his Jill is or was the equivalent of Maud Dennison. I am willing to admit that I might, at that early period of my career, have succumbed to the charms of an ordinary Jill; but as it happened, such was not my fate.

Everybody acknowledged Maud's influence. She took our little world by storm, and, truth to tell, she ruled us somewhat imperiously. The men submitted at once, and liked it. I am not sure that the gentler sex liked it quite so well just at first; but they submitted all the same. Lady Welby drove over in state to the Rectory, meaning to be very kind and patronising, and to

take the poor motherless girl by the hand, and so forth ; and Maud, who did not like being patronised, was so dreadfully polite that she reduced that rather weak-minded old lady to tears. She had another manner with the humbler parishioners ; but it was not less effectual, and in the course of a few months she had not only brought about an unprecedented zeal for cleanliness in the village, but had actually persuaded at least half of the women to abandon their Dissenting chapels and return to the bosom of the Mother Church, dragging their astonished husbands after them. I myself had a fastidious dislike to entering the dwellings of the poor of which I was rather proud than ashamed ; but it pleased me to see my ideal flitting, like an angel of light, from one shabby cottage to another.

“ I suppose it is a real pleasure to you to go about like that, doing good ? ” I said to her admiringly one day.

“ It is nothing of the sort, ” she answered, turning upon me in her quick way ; “ I utterly abhor it. The two things that I hate most in the world are bad smells and obstinate ignor-

ance ; but somebody must look after these people, and make them do what is for their good."

She had absolute confidence in her power to make them do anything that she pleased, and I am bound to say that her confidence was justified by results. To this day I cannot understand how she managed to carry out the reforms that she did, without raising up for herself a host of bitter enemies. What proves her to have been no common person is that she made friends instead of foes. Even Mrs. Bunce, that stern Methodist and ruthless disciplinarian, of whom the whole village stood in awe, and whom the great Bunce himself, despite his openly-avowed contempt for all women-folk, secretly feared—even Mrs. Bunce, I say, softened into smiles at Maud's approach, and, "to please the young lady," consented to attend church for two or three Sundays and give the Rector a trial. As far as I can remember, the Rector was weighed in the balance and found wanting ; but that is neither here nor there.

In all these triumphs I took a pride and pleasure which were only tempered by the thought that the process of achieving them took

up a good deal of time which might have been more agreeably employed. It is true that I saw Maud every day of my life ; but it was not every day that she could, or would, come out riding, fishing, or sailing ; hence arose disagreements which might have been called lovers' quarrels, only that, unhappily, the love was all upon one side. That she was no longer in ignorance of my entire devotion to her I was convinced ; but she was pleased to treat me as a mere boy, and evidently did not take me seriously. This was discouraging ; but I consoled myself with the reflection that there was plenty of time before me ; and that, if I had not succeeded as yet in touching her heart, I had at least no rival to dispute the prize with me.

George Warren's behaviour left nothing to be desired. His admiration for Miss Dennison was as great as it ought to have been, but not any greater. He worshipped her from a respectful distance, seldom spoke to her unless she first addressed him, and, although he was our constant companion, generally contrived in a discreet manner to leave us practically alone. Considering how much annoyance he might have caused

me by simply ignoring the fact that he was an occasional incumbrance, I could not but feel that this was very gentlemanly and considerate conduct on his part, and I hinted as much to Maud one afternoon when we were lazily reclining in a punt on Thirlby Broad, pretending to fish. George had, as usual, left us, upon the pretext of trying for pike. He had armed himself with a fly about the size of a tom-tit, and of resplendent colours—an insect which one would fain hope has no counterpart in Nature, but in which he had a lively faith. To the best of my recollection no pike was ever induced to look at it; but my friend was nothing if not persevering.

“What a good fellow George is!” I said.
“I often think he is the best fellow I know.”

“He seems to be very good-natured,” Maud remarked; “but he always was that.”

“Yes; and he’s better than good-natured; he’s a man whom you can thoroughly depend upon, don’t you know—always sure to be at hand when he’s wanted and out of the way when he isn’t. That’s the sort of man whom I like.”

“I daresay you do,” said Maud, laughing;

“but I don’t think he is a very good friend for you.”

“Why not?” I asked, in some surprise.

“Well, I think he encourages you to be selfish; and encouragement in that direction is not what you require. You and Mr. Le Marchant have lived together like a couple of old bachelors till you have got into the way of thinking that everybody and everything must give way to your convenience. It is extremely bad for you.”

“Oh, come! You are not going to call Uncle Bernard selfish, I hope,” said I.

“Perhaps he is not; I don’t know him well enough to say. But I have no doubt about you.”

“You are always finding fault with me,” I sighed.

“I only do it for your good. Bunce, isn’t it true that Mr. Charles is an uncommonly selfish young man?”

“Very like, Miss,” answered Bunce, who was seated at the other end of the punt, watching our floats, to which neither of us was paying any attention — “very like. They mostly is so. Come to that, so is young women.”

"Bunce, what do you mean?"

"Not you, Miss; exceptions there is to every rule. I was a-speakin' in a general way; and in a general way o' speakin' you won't find much thought for others, nor what I call sympathy, unless 'tis here and there in a man o' the world, sim'lar to myself. Though p'raps I didn't ought to say so."

Bunce was fond of describing himself as a man of the world; and, indeed, he had seen a good deal of the world in a geographical sense, having enlisted when a lad, and having served his Queen and country in India, at the Cape, and elsewhere. He had brought back with him a large stock of varied information, and also, I am sorry to say, a sublime contempt for his native county, the inhabitants of which, he was wont to declare, had neither "eddcation nor manners."

"You'll find Mr. Chawls improve as he grows older, Miss," he continued, with perfect gravity. "There's a deal o' truth in what you say about livin' in a dead-and-alive place like this. 'Taint good for a man—makes him what I call narrer in his views. Times I feel it creepin' on me myself."

"You don't say so, Bunce!"

"I do, indeed, Miss. Though, with my missus and my large fam'ly, 'tisin't much chance that I get to be self-indulgent."

"Exactly so ; you are obliged to consider other people. Now, if Mr. Charles will only have the sense, when he is old enough, to marry a nice managing woman like Mrs. Bunce, there will be hope for him."

Bunce grunted, and muttered something about a deal of experience being wanted to manage a managing woman, but I thought he had already monopolised rather too much of the conversation, and now turned my back towards him, and leaning forward, with my elbows on my knees, began to describe to Maud the sort of person whom I should like to marry. Bunce was never any restraint upon the privacy of our intercourse. He commonly stationed himself at the opposite extremity of the punt, and heard no more of what we were saying than we intended him to hear. Maud listened to me with a slight smile upon her parted lips ; but her gray eyes were gazing into vacancy, and I am afraid that her attention was not diverted from the current of her own thoughts by my delicate innuendoes.

"No household ought to be without a woman," she said, presently. "I am sure you and Mr. Le Marchant would be a great deal happier if you had one at the Hall. By-the-bye, how is Mr. Farquhar?"

"Very bad," I answered. "My uncle thinks he won't get over it. He said this morning that, unless there was better news to-morrow, he should have to go down to Scotland."

"My father says," Maud went on, "that if Mr. Farquhar dies, perhaps Mrs. Farquhar will come and live at Thirlby. I do hope she will; it would be such a good thing for everybody."

I was about to express my dissent from this view when Bunce anticipated me by giving a long growl and shaking his head violently. "We don't want sheä!" he said.

Bunce prided himself on having shaken off what he called the "outlandish lingo" of his forefathers; but in moments of emotion he would occasionally lapse into broad Norfolk. "We don't want sheä!" he repeated, emphatically.

We both looked at him in some surprise. "You don't like Mrs. Farquhar, Bunce, eh?" I asked, after a short pause.

"I do not, sir," he answered. "More than that, I can't abide her. Talk about a managing woman—oh, Lord! She come down here once, years ago—time when poor Squire was in the thick of all his sad trouble; and what with her textes and her sermons, she worrited him that way that I'd like to have took and wrung her old neck for her—if I may make so free for to speak my mind. I don't say," continued Bunce, meditatively, "but what there was room for argyment; but to cast it up to Squire that he was to blame for all as happened—why 'twas what I call neither kindness nor truth. 'Your house is left unto you dissolute,' says she. 'And more shame to you,' thinks I, 'for sayin' so! Quotin' Scriptur agin your own flesh and blood!—'tis sheer blasphemy!' No! we don't want to see that lady at Thirlby no more."

This outbreak astonished me not a little. Once, and only once, before had Bunce alluded to some mysterious trouble which had fallen upon the family; but I had not liked to question him about matters which my uncle had not chosen to reveal to me; nor, in all probability, should I have received an answer if I had done

so. Maud, naturally, knew of no reason for being so scrupulous.

"What trouble are you talking about, Bunce?" she asked.

Bunce recovered himself at once. "Lor! dear me! if there ain't a bite!" he exclaimed. "Ah, he's off, and took the bait with him, too! That's where 'tis, you see; you can't talk and catch fish at the same time."

I think he was a good deal vexed with himself for having been betrayed into saying so much, for he relapsed into an obstinate silence, and was barely civil to Miss Dennison when he wished her good evening.

"Is it true that Mrs. Farquhar is so disagreeable?" Maud asked me, presently.

"I don't know anything about her," I answered; "but it doesn't much signify, for I think I can say with some confidence that she won't come to live at Thirlby. I daresay she wouldn't come if she were asked, but she won't be asked."

"How can you tell? After all, she is Mr. Le Marchant's mother."

"Yes; but they have seen very little of one

another for the last twenty years. The fact is, I don't think they hit it off particularly well. Anyhow, I agree with Bunce—we don't want her."

Maud was beginning, "I feel sure that she is a very nice old lady;" but at this juncture George rejoined us, empty-handed but cheerful, and Mrs. Farquhar escaped further discussion.

When I reached home I found that my uncle had already started for Scotland. A telegram, it appeared, had arrived to say that Mr. Farquhar was dying, and he had just had time to pack his portmanteau and leave in order to catch the night-mail. In spite of what I had said to Maud this news made me a little uncomfortable. I knew that my uncle's inclinations would be strongly against inviting a third person to share our peaceful and monotonous manner of existence; but I also knew that his own inclinations were the very last thing that would be likely to weigh with him, and I am sure that no one breathed more heartfelt aspirations that night for Mr. Farquhar's recovery than I did.



CHAPTER III.

THE GENERAL COUNSELS FIRMNESS.

PERHAPS Maud had not been far wrong when she accused me of expecting everybody and everything to give way to my personal convenience. Some justification for this curiously sanguine mental attitude might have been found in the fact that circumstances always had hitherto arranged themselves very nearly in accordance with my wishes ; and I must confess that, from the moment that I realised its desirability, I began to believe in the recovery of Mr. Farquhar, who nevertheless died that same night. When the news of this melancholy event reached Thirlby, I therefore felt myself slightly aggrieved. The deceased gentleman, having been upwards of eighty years of age, could not justly be accused of having quitted the world with indecent precipitation,

and I exonerated him from all blame in the matter; but I certainly did feel that Fortune had treated me rather ill. The more I thought about it the more the conviction forced itself upon me that we were destined to receive Mrs. Farquhar as a permanent inmate, and such a prospect did not require Jim Bunce's wrathful denunciation to fill me with dismay.

"The unfortunate part of it," I remarked to Miss Dennison, to whom I carried my anxieties and misgivings with some faint hope of consolation; "the unfortunate part of it is that the old lady will undoubtedly be left without a home. There is a stepson, who comes into the place, and I am very much afraid my uncle will think he ought at all events to ask her here."

"I should think that was the very least he could do," she agreed; "but I understood you to say that you were sure he would do nothing of the kind."

"He will, if he thinks it his duty," I answered, gloomily. "My only hope is that she may decline. She would be sure to find it uncommonly dull down here; I build a little upon that."

"Perhaps she will think it her duty to come. I should in her place."

"Ah, if it were only you, instead of that old frump!" I sighed, wistfully.

"It is very foolish of you to make up your mind that she is an old frump. Probably, if she does come, you will be devoted to her in a few weeks. I haven't a doubt that a year ago you would have thought it the greatest nuisance in the world to have a girl continually riding and sailing with you; yet you manage to put up with me. You are just the sort of person who hates all strangers at first, and then worships them, and then gets tired of them and hates them again."

I assured Maud solemnly that she little knew how cruelly she was maligning me. That I was disposed to be prejudiced against strangers might be true, though such a thing had never been said of me before; but that I was fickle towards those whom I—towards my friends, in short, was as unfounded a charge as could possibly have been brought. If I possessed any virtue at all, it was that of fidelity to my friends.

“So long as they don’t rub you the wrong way or bore you,” she said, laughing. Where-upon I became angry, and we had one of those quarrels which were made up as soon as ever she chose that they should be, and which I fear that she sometimes provoked out of nothing but that wanton love of exercising power from which not even the best of women are wholly exempt. Upon that occasion our quarrel did not last long, nor did the state of depression into which I had been thrown by the thought of Mrs. Farquhar’s possible descent upon us. After all, I reflected, there was a very good chance of her having other plans; and, whatever was to happen, there was no use in making oneself miserable about it before the event. So I soon recovered my natural good spirits, and we had a very delightful week of fine weather and rural pursuits before my uncle, who had remained in Scotland to attend the funeral, came back.

My first glance at his face, when he did come back, showed me that it had that worried look which it always wore on his return from Scotland; but I hesitated to come out point-

blank with the question which was trembling on my lips, and as soon as dinner was over he saved me the trouble of asking it by remarking: "We must get Mrs. Peters to put things in order a little; I expect my mother to come to us soon."

"Not for good and all?" I exclaimed, aghast.

"Why not?" asked my uncle, smiling.

I was not exactly prepared upon the spur of the moment, to say why not. I could only shake my head despairingly, and declare that I was sure it would never do.

"She is only coming on a visit at present," my uncle went on; "but I can't undertake to say that she may not finally decide upon making Thirlby her home. It would be a natural arrangement, Charley."

"It might be natural," I said, dolefully; "but it don't follow that it would be pleasant."

My uncle made no rejoinder for some time, but sat sipping his claret meditatively, and drumming upon the table with his fingers. At last he resumed:

"So you think it wouldn't be a wise plan, Charley?"

"I don't think about it; I *know* it wouldn't," I answered, emphatically.

My uncle raised his eyebrows. "May I ask whether you have any particular reason for saying that?" he inquired.

I had, as the reader is aware, a particular reason; but I could not very well state it. My uncle and I were upon terms of such intimacy and mutual confidence that I seldom hesitated to express my inmost thoughts to him; but the line must be drawn somewhere, and it is hardly possible to tell any man that you have reason to believe his mother to be a canting old busybody. So I abstained from any allusion to Bunce and his revelations, and only urged the obvious objections that there must be to the introduction of a third person into the household. Was it not proverbial that two were company and three none? And when two out of the three had lived in the closest companionship for so many years, while the third was to all intents and purposes a stranger, and at the same time a very near relation, what hope was there of their being able to get on together? We should be obliged

to explain all our stupid little jokes, and, of course, we should be made to feel how stupid they were by the process of explanation. We should have to think before we spoke—a thing we had never accustomed ourselves to do. Conversation, in short, would be simply impossible.

My uncle listened to me patiently, with that faint smile of his which so many people disliked, thinking that he was laughing at them. I, who was better acquainted with him, knew that he was not laughing at me, or that, if he was, it was in no unkindly spirit. So I proceeded, warming with my subject :

“There will be an end to all comfort; we may as well make up our minds to that at once. We shall not be allowed to dine in the library any more, and, of course, we shall not be allowed to smoke directly after dinner. All your books and papers will be carefully dusted every morning, and put away into places from which it will take weeks of patient research to disinter them. And then think of the people who will come and stay with us ! Because naturally Mrs. Farquhar won't care about living in a howling wilderness. All the poke bonnets will come

over the Border; and Deacon M'Tavish will ask a blessing before meat; and read us a long sermon on Sunday evening, preparatory to getting tipsy on whisky toddy, and——”

My uncle apologised for interrupting me, but observed that I seemed to have formed a slightly mistaken notion of his mother. Her friends did not, as a rule, wear poke bonnets; she was not exclusively Scotch in her sympathies, nor was she a Presbyterian; although—— Here he paused, and apparently decided not to finish his sentence. “In fact,” he concluded, briskly, “she is a very good, kind-hearted, and agreeable person.”

It was not for me to contradict him, little as I was disposed to accept this definition of the unknown lady. “That may be,” I answered, doggedly; “but she is a *third* person all the same.”

“Which nobody can deny,” remarked my uncle. And then there was a tolerably long period of silence.

“If my mother and I should agree that it would be best for her to remain on here,” resumed Uncle Bernard at last——“we have agreed upon



nothing yet ; but if we should do so—I think, perhaps, you would not find her presence quite as great a nuisance as you expect.”

“Oh, I am not the one to be considered,” I answered, hastily, feeling a little ashamed of myself. “I should not be the principal sufferer. It was of you that I was thinking.” This, I am afraid, was not strictly true ; but I daresay I believed it to be so at the time.

“Well,” said my uncle, “you were thinking of us both, probably. I was going to say that your objections don’t apply with the same force that they would have done a few years ago. We have been very good friends, Charley ; we have had many a happy day together, and we shall have many more, I hope, only they won’t be consecutive. The pleasant old humdrum life which you regret, and which I most likely regret a great deal more than you do, couldn’t have gone on much longer in any case. I shall stick to it ; but you will go away from it ; and, therefore, it won’t so much matter to you whether things progress in the old way at Thirlby or not. Have you been thinking at all lately of what career in life you mean to choose for yourself ?”

I couldn't say that I had.

"I don't want to hurry you," my uncle continued; "but the time, you know, is getting short, and it would be as well to have a definite plan—particularly as your field of choice seems to me to be rather narrow. The army, which I always fancied would be the profession that would suit you best, you declined."

"Yes," I answered, with a sigh; "I declined that." The truth was that I was quite of my uncle's mind as to the army; but at the time when it had been suggested to me I had declared against it simply because it would have entailed my leaving Eton and giving up Oxford—neither of which things was I disposed to do, seeing how promising an oar I was.

"So that the remaining professions will not require all the fingers of one hand to count. There is the Bar."

"I don't think I should do over and above well at that."

"The Church?"

"Good gracious!"

"Exactly so. Well, then, there is commerce."

"My dear Uncle Bernard!"

“Exactly so again. Do you know of any other way of occupying yourself and making a little money?”

I scratched my head and sighed, and finally observed that I thought farming would be rather jolly.

“But I am afraid they haven’t got a Professor of Agriculture at Oxford yet; and besides, without flattering you, I think you have talents enough to fit you for something a little more ambitious than that. I am told that young fellows in Government Offices lead a pleasant enough sort of life, and it is one which might easily be made to serve as a stepping-stone to better things. What do you think? I have been such a recluse for the best part of my life that I have lost what little interest I had at one time; but Tom knows a great many big-wigs, and of course he would put in a word for you.”

Tom was the General, my uncle’s brother, of whom I have spoken. I said I thought I should rather like a Government clerkship, provided, of course, that it was in an office of the right sort, where one would have a chance of meeting other fellows whom one knew. What was the precise

nature of the better things to which my uncle alluded I did not quite know ; but I imagined vaguely that they might include a seat in Parliament, and it flashed across me that a Member of Parliament would be a personage likely to stand high in Maud's estimation. I repeated that I thought that would do very well, and then we settled down to a discussion of the possible future which lasted us for the remainder of the evening. Thus, whether designedly or not, my uncle led my thoughts entirely away from Mrs. Farquhar, whose name was not mentioned between us for several days afterwards. But when General Le Marchant (who, like my uncle, had been in Scotland visiting the widow in her affliction) came to stay with us, my prejudices received a somewhat unexpected reinforcement. The General, it seemed, held very decided convictions upon the question which was causing me so much uneasiness, and he took the earliest opportunity of expressing them to me.

"Charley, my boy," he said, "you mustn't allow this—you really must *not* allow it. I'm an older man than you, and I suppose I may say that I know a little more of the world and the

nature of mankind than you do ; and believe me there couldn't be a greater mistake than for Bernard and my mother to try and live under the same roof. It's just one of those notions that ought to be nipped in the bud. If it isn't put a stop to now, there'll be no end of bother about it afterwards, and you're the one that can stop it."

"I quite agree with you, General," I said. "I told my uncle the other day that I was sure it wouldn't do."

"Ah, well, you can't know much about it ; you never saw my mother in your life, did you ? Mind you, I'm not saying one word against her. The dearest old lady that ever lived, and the best of mothers to us in days gone by—and all that. But—well, I can't go into details, and if I could you wouldn't understand. You must take my word for it that she is a precious difficult person to live with. There are people who are as good as gold, and who yet would make a thin-skinned fellow like Bernard wish he was dead a dozen times a day. Don't you understand what I mean ?"

I did not quite follow the General's drift ; but

it was entirely superfluous for him to give me reasons for keeping Mrs. Farquhar out of Thirlby ; and so I told him. I added, however, that remonstrances would probably come with greater weight from him than from me.

“Not a bit of it !” the General returned. “Certainly I can show Bernard plainly enough that he is contemplating a piece of folly which he will regret to the end of his life, and so forth ; but, bless your soul ! he knows all that as well as I do. Bernard is such a confoundedly unselfish old beggar that it wouldn’t be of the slightest use to bring forward arguments of that kind. He would simply tell me in polite language that it made no odds to me, and that if he chose to be uncomfortable, that was his lookout. But if you were to oppose him on personal grounds—making it appear, don’t you know, as if it would be a horrid bore to you to have an old lady in the house—I believe that might have some effect upon him.”

“I’ve tried that already,” I replied, remembering, with a twinge of conscience, that my efforts had not been altogether of the disinterested nature suggested by my companion. “I put it

to him in that way the other day ; but his answer was that it wouldn't be of so much consequence to me now, as I shall be very little at home in the future. He thinks I ought to be going in for a career of some kind."

"Yes, yes ; so he was telling me. He said he hoped I might manage to help you up the ladder perhaps. Well, I daresay I may be able to give you a hoist when the time comes," said the General, who was possessed of considerable social influence, and took an innocent pride in displaying it. "Make your mind easy about that, my boy. But in the meantime, I wish you would try every dodge you can think of to dissuade your uncle from letting himself in for a heap of needless worry. He has had worry enough in his life, poor old fellow, and I hate to think of his peace being disturbed now. You must be firm with him, Charley. Firmness, you know—a little firmness, that's the thing. Poor Bernard is weak ; he lets himself be talked over. Now, if I were in his place, I should have no talking or fuss about it ; I should say, 'Look here, my dear mother ; you and I are not made to row in the same boat ; and we won't attempt

it. It isn't my fault, and I daresay it isn't yours either ; but there's the fact, and we can't get over it.' And then I wouldn't hear another word about the matter."

I did not myself consider my uncle a weak man ; but the impression that he was weak was so prevalent among his friends that it was hardly worth while to dispute the General's assertion. "You may depend upon my doing my best," I said.

"That's right !" cried the General. "And I'll back you up."

This conversation took place as we were walking back from the Broads, whither we had been to inspect the decoys and to hear Bunce's views upon the prospects of the duck-shooting season, which was now within a few days of opening. My instinctive antipathy to Mrs. Farquhar was not lessened by what the General had said, but it was beginning to be mingled with a considerable spice of curiosity ; and while I was dressing for dinner I busied myself with many conjectures as to the character of this singular lady, whose sons appeared to regard her with something of the feeling ascribed by the poet to the neighbours

of Peter Bell. What made the matter the more inexplicable was that these two sons were as kind-hearted a couple of men as could have been found throughout the length and breadth of England ; and I was not altogether sorry that Mrs. Farquhar was about to pay us a visit ; though I had no wish that the visit should be a protracted one.

At dinner the General, who had been fidgety and unlike himself during the day, displayed his usual good spirits, and favoured us with many jokes and anecdotes. Across the mists of years I can see him sitting there now, one hand clasping the stem of his glass, the other thrust into his waistcoat pocket, and his jolly face one great, beaming smile. " Did I ever tell you about my meeting the old Bishop of Cirencester when I was in command of the 117th ? Gad ! I shall never forget it. ' Colonel,' he said, ' what do you cast horses for ? ' ' What for ? ' says I ; ' oh, because they're unsound, gone in the wind, or otherwise unfit for their work.' ' Well,' says the old chap, ' I can't make it out. My coachman bought one of your cast horses for me the other day, and neither he nor I can discover anything

wrong with him. A big black horse, with one white stocking——’ ‘Oh dear, oh dear!’ I said; ‘for Heaven’s sake, my lord, keep it dark! Why, that’s the troop-sergeant-major’s horse, and—ha! ha! ha!’” etc. etc.

I wonder how many times we had laughed at that time-honoured yarn. I am not sure that I ever saw the point of it, or made out how it was that the sergeant-major’s horse had been sold; but I would defy any one to have looked at the General’s face as he told it and not laughed.

My uncle, it struck me, laughed rather more heartily than usual; and from this and other symptoms, such as the production of a certain green-sealed Burgundy after dinner, I was led to suspect him of a design to keep the General in good humour. But if he flattered himself that he was going to escape his lecture, that bottle of Burgundy had been brought up from the cellar in vain. No sooner was the cloth removed—I am writing of the era when people used to sit an hour after dinner and see their opposite neighbours reflected upside-down in mahogany tables—no sooner, I say, had Cooper and the cloth vanished than the General opened fire. “What’s this I hear, Ber-

nard, about my mother taking up her abode with you ?”

“I can’t tell what you may have heard,” answered my uncle, placidly.

“But is it a fact? That’s what I want to know.”

“Now, Tom,” said my uncle, “I won’t be bullied.”

“Won’t you, though? By George! that’s just what you will be, if you allow her to establish herself in your house.”

The full brilliancy of this repartee did not appear to strike the General until he had thought it over; for there was a lapse of some seconds before he went off into a series of suppressed chuckles. “It won’t do, you know,” he resumed at last, recovering his gravity; “it really will *not* do.”

“So Charley has been telling me,” observed my uncle.

“And quite right, too! Charley never spoke a truer word in his life. And I must say, Bernard,” continued the General, with a wink at me, “that I think this is a matter upon which Charley is entitled to be heard. You ought to

consider how it will affect him before you decide upon making such a change."

"Well," said my uncle, "I haven't decided yet."

"Ah, but you're wavering, my dear fellow; and you mustn't waver. I know what you are, Bernard; you like to turn a question over and over, and hear what everybody has to say about it, and look at it from all the points of the compass, before you make up your mind. That may be a very good system to go upon for ordinary every-day work; but it won't meet all cases. And this is just an instance of a case that had much better not be discussed."

"Except with you and Charley, I suppose."

"Bless your heart! I don't want to discuss it; nor does Charley, I'll be bound. We're dead against the plan, both of us. All we want you to do is to make up your mind. Don't you see what will happen if you leave the thing open? Why, some fine morning she'll suggest it herself; and when once she does that, it'll be all up with you."

My uncle, whose eyes had hitherto been fixed upon his dessert-knife, which he was balancing

upon his forefinger, glanced quickly up at the General now, with a half-amused, half-deprecating smile. "The fact of the matter is that she *has* suggested it," he said.

The General gave a long whistle. "This is bad ; this is worse than I expected—by long chalks ! What answer did you make ?"

"I said we had better take a little more time to consider of it."

"Ah, dear me !" sighed the General, shaking his head, mournfully ; "you oughtn't to have said that. That wasn't the way to take it at all. You should have rapped out a good round 'No.'"

My uncle laughed outright. "I must confess," he said, "that I was not prepared to be so peremptory as that. Doesn't it strike you, Tom, that we are entertaining Charley with a rather shocking display of unfilial feeling ?"

"No ; it doesn't," returned the General, somewhat tartly. "The boy isn't a fool ; he understands well enough. It is not as though my mother would like living here. She would be a thousand times happier in Scotland, where she would have all her relations and friends within hail of her."

"So she says."

"Then, my dear, good fellow, why the deuce don't you urge her to stay there?"

"Her view is that it would be the right thing for her to come here."

"Right thing be hanged! It isn't the right thing; it's the wrong thing!" exclaimed the General, angrily. "Do you think I don't know? I wouldn't have this happen for a thousand pounds! I did hope you were to have peace and quietness for the rest of your days, if you were to have nothing else; and now—now——" If it had not been so absurdly improbable, I could almost have fancied that there were tears in the General's eyes and voice at this point.

"I thought it was upon Charley's account that you objected, Tom," said my uncle, gently.

"Well, well; don't interrupt a man in the middle of his sentence. What I was going to say was that it's your duty to be firm. Just show a little firmness, and depend upon it there'll be no more bother. Why, what should I say if she were to propose to come and live with me?—though Heaven knows she would never worry me a tenth part as much as she

will you !—‘ My dear mother,’ I should say, ‘ it’s out of the question. Come and stay whenever you like, and I’ll go and see you as often as you want me ; but as for our setting up house together, we should be a pair of fools to think of such a thing. You’ve got decided ideas ; so have I—and they are different from yours in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred. You like your own way ; so do I. Now I put it to you as a wise and superior woman, *could* we live together without making one another wretched ? But, whether you agree with me or not, I tell you plainly that I’ve made up my mind, and that I shall never consent to such an arrangement.’ That’s what I should say,” concluded the General, not without some complacency.

“ I am sure I should never be able to put things in that convincing way,” observed my uncle. “ I’ll tell you what, Tom ; *you* shall undertake this task for me when she comes. Say all that to her ; only substitute my name for yours.”

“ Eh ?” said the General, his face growing perceptibly longer. “ Well—I could do that, no doubt ; but don’t you think it ought to come from you ? Thirlby isn’t my house, you see.”

"Tom, Tom," said my uncle, gravely; "I believe you are afraid of our mother."

"You're another!" retorted the General laughing, but at the same time looking somewhat crestfallen. By-and-by he added, in a much more subdued tone than he had hitherto employed, "If you are really in earnest, you know, Bernard, and if you think I could do any good by tackling her, I'll do it like a shot. She can't eat me, when all's said and done."

"No, no," answered my uncle; "I won't put your courage to so severe a test. You are an admirable reasoner, Tom; but some people, as you know, are not amenable to reason. No—I think, in spite of your warning, we will leave the question open for the present. And now, pray let us talk about something else. Charley, I hope we are to have some duck this year. Bunce tells me they are getting more and more scarce."

"Bunce says that every summer," I remarked. "He is so afraid of strangers being disappointed that he always likes to prepare them for the worst. I saw plenty of duck this afternoon."

The General made no protest against the change of subject; but for the remainder of the

evening he favoured me at intervals with nods and winks which I took to mean that he had done what in him lay towards averting the threatened calamity, and that it was now my turn to exert myself. I did not, however, think fit to respond to these mute appeals. For one thing, my uncle had expressed a distinct wish to hear no more about his mother's proposed advent just then; and, although I was not at all in awe of him I had the habit of obedience. Moreover, I knew that what I had to say would be far more likely to produce the desired effect if said between ourselves. Finally, I was inclined to think that I would hold my arguments in reserve until I should have seen Mrs. Farquhar. What had passed between my uncle and the General had only served to increase my curiosity with regard to that mysterious and formidable personage. The General had been pleased to say that I was not a fool, and that I understood it all; but, in truth, I did not understand it a bit. My own feeling was that any intruder would be an intolerable nuisance: this one, as far as had yet appeared, was no worse than the general run of old ladies.

Our little party was less cheerful than usual that night. We were all three conscious of the restraint which is the inevitable consequence of an unfinished discussion, and we went early to bed. That is to say that the General and I went upstairs, while my uncle betook himself to his study, where it was his habit to sit up till the small hours, either reading or writing ; for he was something of a bookworm, and would occasionally contribute articles on literary subjects to one of the few Reviews that were then in existence.

Upon the landing I met Mrs. Peters, the house-keeper, returning from the round of inspection which she made every night to see whether the house was on fire, or whether there were burglars concealed under any of the beds ; and it occurred to me that I might get some information about Mrs. Farquhar out of her. But Mrs. Peters, who had taught me my Catechism in my childhood, and had looked after my wardrobe ever since, had no sort of respect for me.

“Now you go off to bed, Mr. Charles, and don’t worrit me with questions,” she said. “The lady will be here soon, and you can judge of

her yourself. I'm not one to chatter about my betters."

"Was there ever anything in the nature of a row between her and my uncle, Peters?" I asked, ignoring this disclaimer.

"Row? What, a quarrel, do you mean? Never was nothink of the sort. Why, you ought to know the Squire better, Mr. Charles, than to think he'd quarrel with one of the family—least-ways with his mother."

"Well, I suppose she is one of the family, isn't she? I know there was some trouble, because Bunce told me so."

"I'll speak to that old Bunce for his good next time I see him!" cried Mrs. Peters, wrathfully. "He's the foolishhest man ever I knew, is Bunce, and that opinionated you'd think he had the wisdom of Solomon to hear him talk. By-gones is by-gones, and they don't concern me nor Bunce, nor you neither, Mr. Charles. You haven't said a word to the Squire, have you?"

"Of course not."

"Don't you do it, there's a good boy. There was a trouble; but it's all over years and years ago, and we shan't hear no more of it, please God.

It never have been spoke about, nor never will be by me, Mr. Charles."

This was rather tantalising; but I could not very well press Peters, to say more. I only ventured to inquire whether Mrs. Farquhar had been concerned in the trouble alluded to.

"Oh, she!" answered Peters, rather contemptuously; "no, she hadn't nothing to do with it, beyond making the worst of a bad job. There's some folk as is like that, and she were always a weak creatur' to my mind, for all her talking and lecturing."

It seemed evident that Mrs. Farquhar's character gave scope for a variety of interpretations.





CHAPTER IV.

THE RECTOR TALKS IN HIS SLEEP.

EVERYBODY, or nearly everybody, it may be assumed, has some secrets. There will always be certain episodes in the private history of Pylades which he will not feel it necessary to communicate to Orestes, and *vice versâ*. There are things which one does not tell to one's best friends, and perhaps could not if one would, since

“Not even the tenderest heart, and next our own,
Knows half the reasons why we smile or sigh.”

The above observation may be perfectly true, not to say a truism; nevertheless, when its truth is brought home to a man by abrupt personal experience, he must be singularly philosophical if he do not consider himself more or less injured. Now I particularly prided myself upon the fact that my uncle always

told me everything, and was even wont to consult me with regard to matters upon which my advice could certainly not be of much use to him ; therefore it galled me to think that I had been kept completely in the dark as to an event which was known to Peters and Bunce, and probably to many other people besides. "Why," I could not help asking myself, "should I not have been trusted as much as the servants?" I went to bed a victim to the pangs of jealousy, to which, I must own, were added those of baffled curiosity. What could that mysterious trouble of my uncle's have been? I wondered, indulging in a variety of bold surmises, as I lay there in the dark. That it had an element of disgrace in it was pretty evident from Peters' manner, and I was divided between suspicions of my late aunt's conjugal fidelity and a vague conjecture that Uncle Bernard, who was not a rich man, might have speculated, and lost the half of his fortune, in years gone by. Young as I was, I was aware that the majority of earthly troubles are connected with women or money, and my guessing powers did not carry me beyond these two

alternatives. Afterwards, when I heard all about it, I wondered that so natural a solution of the puzzle had not suggested itself to me; but I have observed that natural solutions are always the last things that do suggest themselves to a puzzled mind.

I was not at that time possessed of all my present wisdom and acuteness; but, on the other hand, I had then several valuable faculties which I would give a good deal to have back now, and amongst these was a ready and unfailing power of going to sleep. When I woke up in the morning things looked very different—as indeed they always do in the morning. After all, what had I to do with the past? And what did it signify if I was to be kept in ignorance of its dark pages? Of course, Uncle Bernard had been young once upon a time, and many things might have happened during that pre-historic era; but it was all so long ago! He must have almost forgotten it himself. It was a great deal more to the purpose to think about the present and the future, and to devise some means of preventing Mrs. Farquhar from interfering with his comfort therein.

And upon this problem also the early sunshine of a summer day seemed to cast a hopeful light. Perhaps, when she saw the place, she would not be inclined to remain. Very likely she would not; for my uncle himself had given us to understand that her heart was in the Highlands; and even if the worst should come to the worst, and she should persist in placing duty above inclination, there were still many expedients which might be resorted to with success—such as carefully placing her in a thorough draught at meal-times, encouraging the dogs to make themselves at home in her bedroom, setting Jim Bunce at her, and the like. Action is always so much more convincing than argument.

And when I went downstairs I found the General in the gun-room, sorting cartridges and whistling cheerfully, and he said, "Look here, Charley; I think you'd better not bother your uncle any more about that business just now. Time enough when she comes, you know. Suppose we try and forget all about it for the present, and enjoy our liberty while it lasts, eh?"

I hastened to express my cordial concurrence in this sensible view, and my uncle was evidently

relieved when he found that the allied forces did not intend to renew the attack during breakfast-time. It was his liberty a great deal more than ours that was threatened, and he might have been quite as anxious as we were to make the most of the precious days which still remained to him.

That the General should be willing to consent to a truce was likely enough, and made life much pleasanter for us all than it would otherwise have been; but what I did not expect was to find so decided an opponent of my uncle's schemes entering upon something very like a shamefaced recantation of his opinions. Yet this was what actually took place within less than a week. The General, good man, had a weakness—a very harmless and amiable weakness, yet one which had, I believe, involved him in a good many difficulties at odd times. All his life long he had been a martyr to feminine charms and wiles—the mere sight of a pretty face was sufficient to convert him into a poor, helpless creature, and the pleading of pretty lips was what he had never yet been able to withstand. How he had contrived to

live through more than half of his sum of earthly years without having been bound in matrimonial fetters was a marvel, to be explained only by the old adage that there is safety in numbers. Now, the very first day that he saw Maud Dennison he became, so to speak, her slave. I am bound to say that I think she took some pains to captivate him; but probably it would have been very much the same thing if she had not, Nature having gifted her with claims upon his obedience which rendered all efforts superfluous. And so, when this susceptible old gentleman began, in the innocence of his heart, to try and enlist Maud's sympathies upon our side in the matter of Mrs. Farquhar, and when, instead of being convinced, she declared herself openly against us, what could he do but hesitate, temporise, and finally go over, bag and baggage, to the enemy?

What had this unfortunate Mrs. Farquhar done, Maud wanted to know, that her son was to be urged to refuse her shelter? Nothing? Then, was it really because Mr. Le Marchant and Charley were afraid of their free-and-easy bachelor habits being interfered with that the

poor widow was to be driven away from Thirlby, and forced to make a new home for herself in her old age?

"My dear young lady," the General would reply to these and other similar queries, "life is a much more complicated business than you suppose. You want to settle everything by the hard and fast rule of the Fifth Commandment; but that's impossible. The fact of the matter is that my brother Bernard and my mother don't get on together, and never will. You may say that they ought to try; but what is the good of their trying when they must both know perfectly well beforehand that they won't succeed? Either it would end in a quarrel, or one of them would have to give way. And, unfortunately, it is only too certain which one that would be."

"And would that be such a very terrible thing?" Maud would rejoin. Of course it was not for her to set up her opinion against General Le Marchant's; but she could not help thinking that life was only a complicated business because people chose to make it so, and that, if they would simply do what was right without

troubling themselves about consequences, things would not only go more smoothly, but they themselves would be far happier.

It was all very well for the General to shake his head and laugh, and say that Miss Maud would not be so positive when she was twenty years older; that did not make Miss Maud one whit less positive for the time being; nor did it save him from being signally worsted at each fresh encounter. I used to listen to their discussions with some amusement, feeling pretty sure that the course of events would not be greatly affected by them, one way or the other, and rather enjoying the spectacle of the General's discomfiture; but, as I said before, I really was not prepared to see him desert his colours altogether, and it took my breath away when he announced to me in the course of a private interview that he believed he had been a little too hasty in what he had said about his mother, and that he was now disposed to think that it might be well to give the thing a trial.

I observed that my uncle was apparently not the only man who was liable to be talked over.

“‘Talked over’ is hardly the way to put it,”

the General said. "The *subject* has been talked over, certainly, between me and your friend Miss Maud, and I don't mind confessing that I have got a few fresh ideas from her. That girl has an old head on young shoulders, Charley."

"And a very pretty head," I added, for I was determined not to spare the traitor.

"That," answered the General, sharply, "has nothing to do with it. I am the last man in the world to be influenced by a woman's looks. I haven't changed my opinion at all."

"I understood you to say that you had," I remarked.

"Then, my good fellow, you misunderstood me, that's all. What I do say is that women are better judges in cases of this kind than we are, and that it is quite on the cards that Miss Maud may be right and that I may be wrong. Let us give the thing a trial; let us stand by, and allow Bernard and my mother to have fair play. Fools rush in, you know, where angels fear to tread."

"It seems to me," I said, "that in the present instance the angel has rushed in, and that it is we poor fools who are in a fright. What has

become of your firmness, General? I believe if Miss Maud were to tell you to go to Scotland to-morrow and bring Mrs. Farquhar back with you you'd do it."

"Oh, come; don't *you* talk!" retorted the General. "If she told you to stand on your head on the top of the church steeple you'd do it. Do you think that I don't know that she has got you well under her thumb? Why, you never take your eyes off her! And you're a young fellow, mind you, whereas I'm an old man."

I did not see that his case was much improved by this undeniable fact; but his allusion had the effect of putting me to silence. I had not yet reached that period of life at which a young man in love delights to parade his infatuation; I was very much afraid of being chaffed, and I had no desire that the state of my feelings should be known to any one, except George Warren and Maud herself. I told George subsequently of the General's defection and its cause, and he said he didn't wonder at it.

"Well," I returned, not quite pleased, "I must say I do rather wonder at it. I shouldn't

have thought an old fellow like the General would have allowed himself to be over-persuaded by a girl who might almost be his grand-daughter. And Maud is quite wrong, you know."

"Can she be wrong?" asked George.

"Why, yes," I said, "I presume she can, seeing that she is mortal. I'm not sure that I care much for people who never make mistakes. It is quite natural that Maud should have made a mistake in this case; but I'll be hanged if it's natural in a man of the General's age to let her lead him by the nose. Between you and me, I shan't be very sorry when the General goes back to his military duties."

The truth was that I was slightly irritated against my good friend the General at this time, for reasons quite unconnected with his deplorable change of front. I did not, of course, object to the sort of fatherly admiration with which he regarded Maud; but I did object a good deal to his calm way of taking it for granted that, whenever I arranged to meet her and George anywhere, he too was to be of the party. It seemed to show a little want of discrimination. He might have come, and welcome, if, when we

were riding, he would sometimes have cantered on ahead, or if, when we were afloat, he would have gone away and fished with George (who, to be sure, never caught anything), but he did not hesitate to say plainly that he preferred talking to Miss Maud to attempting to catch pike in bright sunshine; and she, for her part, encouraged him in his laziness, sometimes even sending me off with a rod and a ridiculous-looking fly to try my luck—which I did with a very bad grace.

All this was not as it should have been, and it was sad to think that the summer was fast slipping away, and that when September came my duty to the partridges would leave me but little leisure for philandering. Nevertheless, those were happy days. People may say what they please about the climate of England, but no amount of statistics and weather-tables will ever convince me that it has not changed greatly for the worse; and what proves this is that we all sailed out to the Cockle Light, one afternoon towards the end of August, in a north-easterly breeze, and enjoyed it. Will any candid person assert that the North Sea, under the above conditions, is pleasant sailing ground now-a-days? I

tried it myself only the other day, and, upon my word and honour, my teeth chattered to that extent that I could hardly get out an intelligible word. But on that August afternoon, two-and-thirty years ago, the sky was not gray, nor the wind cold, neither had any symptoms of the rheumatism wherewith my bones are vexed in the present year of grace as yet made themselves felt. Inland it was as hot as it had been at all during the summer, and the reapers, who had been hard at work since early morning, were complaining of the scorching sun ; but at sea we had the perfection of sailing weather, with sunshine tempered by a transparent veil of haze, and a refreshing breeze just strong enough to tip the waves with white here and there, and to send the *Sarah Jane* swiftly and steadily upon her way.

Our party was somewhat more numerous than usual, the occasion being one of importance. Bunce's two elder sons, James and William, who had both taken to a seafaring life, and, after many voyages and quite an Odyssey of adventures, had chanced to return to the paternal roof within a few days of one another, had agreed, by their

father's advice, to go into partnership upon the strength of their savings, and to enjoy the sweets of independence and liberty. The upshot of which decision had been the purchase of the good smack *Sarah Jane*, together with the rigging, sails, nets, and other tackle appertaining thereto. So at least I was given to understand at the time; but with my present increased knowledge of such matters, I incline to doubt whether the capital of the firm of Bunce Brothers could have reached a quarter of the amount required for so costly an investment, and it seems likely that if the accounts of the late Bernard Le Marchant, Esq., could be produced, the price of the *Sarah Jane* smack would be found accurately stated therein. However that may be, the Bunces, one and all, had expressed a strong wish that the Squire should personally test the sea-going qualities of their new craft, and as the Squire (whose own sea-going qualities were very shaky) had unequivocally declined to do anything of the sort, a proposal had been substituted that we should all take advantage of the first favourable day to give Miss Dennison a few hours' sail in what Bunce, senior, called "smewth watter."

George Warren, as a matter of course, accompanied us, and at the last moment the Rector, whom we met on our way down to the beach, was collared and added to the party, asseverating, as usual, that he was in a desperate hurry, and that he couldn't and wouldn't come, in the midst of which protestations he was unceremoniously lifted off his legs by that young giant William Bunce, who trotted through the water with him, and deposited him in the boat like a baby. Bunce the elder looked on with a grin of approval while this high-handed proceeding was being carried out.

"My son Willum is a well-growed 'un, Squire," he remarked. "He ain't got his father's brains, but I'll allow that I never had his strength o' limb. Why, he makes no more o' fourteen stun—and Rector's all that, if he's a ounce—nor I should o' liftin' Miss Maud here. I'll carry you myself, Miss," he added, re-assuringly. "Don't you be afeard."

A timid suggestion on my part that I should undertake this share of the labours of embarkation was scouted with contempt, and a few minutes later we were standing out to sea, the little knot

of fisher-folk who had assembled on the beach to see us start giving us and the *Sarah Jane* a parting cheer.

"This is really very jolly," said the General. "Isn't it an odd thing that, during all the years I spent at Thirlby as a boy, I should never have thought of going in for sea-fishing? You never did either, did you, Bernard? I wonder you don't keep a boat of your own lying off here—not a regular yacht, of course, but something of this kind, that could be hauled up on the beach in bad weather. You might get a lot of fun out of her. Why don't you?"

"Firstly," replied my uncle, "because she would infallibly go ashore in the first gale and be broken up into little pieces; secondly, because I shouldn't use her more than three times in the course of the year; and thirdly, because upon those three occasions I should be more or less grievously sea-sick."

"Not you!" returned the Rector, who had now resigned himself to accomplished facts, and was sniffing the salt breezes with much appreciation. "I believe it would do you all the good in the world to fill your lungs with this fine air

every now and then ; and as for the boat, you could have her pulled up high and dry, as the General says. It would be a resource for you, Le Marchant ; and my view is that a man ought to have as many resources as possible. I take all I can get, I know."

"But then you have so many daily duties," observed my uncle, with his quiet smile.

"Yes, yes ; just so—that's where it is," went on the Rector, without any suspicion of irony ; "that's the difference between us. It would be a great deal worse for you, with all your leisure, to be deprived of resources than it would for me ; and I'm afraid, Le Marchant, that you're beginning to give things up—taking too much to your study and your library. You don't ride as often as you used to do, and you never shoot. It's a mistake, you know—a great mistake—all work and no play—and Charley going out into the world, as he must do soon—and all the neighbours getting old people—old friends dead and gone, and no new ones, don't you see ?"

The Rector had thrust his hands into the pockets of his loose coat, and was shaking his head and frowning at his feet, which were stuck

out straight before him. His tongue could never quite keep pace with his thoughts ; so that his sentences, even in the pulpit, would often die away, as this one did, into unintelligible mutterings. After which he would come to himself with a start, feel about him for the lost thread of his ideas, and grasp it—or possibly some other stray thread—triumphantly.

“ By-the-by, though, you will have Mrs. Farquhar with you perhaps,” he said.

“ Perhaps,” answered my uncle.

The Rector, with a prolonged “ H—m—m ! ” drew his hand several times across his mouth and chin, gazing thoughtfully the while at his old friend.

The significance of that inarticulate murmur was obvious ; and Bunce, who had pricked up his ears at the sound of Mrs. Farquhar’s name, grinned sardonically. There was a moment of rather awkward silence ; but the General precipitately threw himself into the breach with a change of subject.

“ I suppose there’ll be water enough for us to get alongside of the Cockle Light, won’t there, Bunce ? Pity we didn’t think of bringing some newspapers for the poor fellows on board.”

My uncle, however, had thought of this—as, indeed, he was always thinking of other people—and he held up a large bundle of papers and magazines. “I have got some fresh butter and eggs for them too,” he said, “which I hope they will not despise. I should have liked to bring them a bottle or two of whisky; but Bunce seemed to think that would exercise a demoralising influence.”

“And I am sure Bunce was perfectly right,” cried Maud, whose brief experience of parochial work had led her to anticipate history by embarking in an ardent crusade against the use of all intoxicating liquors. “Why should men be encouraged to drink that nasty stuff which can’t possibly do them any good, and only leads them to spend their time and their money at public-houses, instead of staying at home with their wives? I wish there was no whisky or gin or rum in the world!—and no beer either!”

“Nay, nay, Miss!” exclaimed Bunce, quite shocked at such reckless language.

“And no beer either,” repeated Maud, firmly. “Mrs. Bunce is quite of my opinion, too, I can assure you.”

"Pooh!" returned Mrs. Bunce's husband, with a lofty gesture, and perhaps with a comfortable inward assurance that the lady alluded to was well out of earshot; "I don't take no 'count of she! Talks a deal o' non—sense, does the missus at times. 'Tis the way o' women-folk—asking your pardon, Miss."

"They can't talk greater nonsense than their husbands do sometimes—especially on Saturday nights," retorted Maud. "And what is to blame for that but the beer? Beer is bad; though I don't mean to say that spirits are not worse."

"So they is, Miss; so they is," agreed Bunce soothingly; experience having probably taught him the futility of argument with the fair sex.

"Well, I don't know," said my uncle. "I think if I were employed on board a light-ship, and had been drenched and frozen by a north-easterly gale, I should be glad enough of a drop of whisky; and so, perhaps, might even you, Miss Dennison. Suppose you were to give it a trial?"

At this Miss Dennison drew her brows together and made a little grimace. It was an unfortunate fact that Maud had not as yet taken very kindly to my uncle.

Meanwhile the *Sarah Jane* had been stealing rapidly along on her southward course before the wind. Thirlby was far astern in the blue distance, and on the lee-bow Winterton church-tower rose, tall and imposing, above the sand-hills and the growth of silvery coarse grass which crowned them. It is an ugly coast-line, say most people,—that long, straight succession of low sand-cliffs and dunes, deeply indented at intervals with gaps scooped out by the sea at spring-tides ; and yet, with its soft grays, its pale yellows and neutral tints, its weather-worn church-towers here and there, its flying shadows and flocks of screaming gulls high over head in the misty air, this low-lying seaboard has a melancholy beauty of its own, which, if one were an artist or a poet, one might possibly contrive to interpret. Being neither the one nor the other, I will content myself with saying that earth, sea, and sky were alike beautiful to me on that especial afternoon ; and, indeed, everybody must be aware that there are certain combinations of age, company, and circumstance which are capable of causing the desert itself to blossom like the rose.

The wind fell light when we were off Winter-ton Sands, and, with the tide setting us up, we made but little way. The two owners of the boat had modestly retired to the extreme end of the bows, where they had perched themselves sideways upon the gunwale, with their backs turned towards us, like a gigantic figure-head of Castor and Pollux. The General and George Warren had moved up near them, and were smoking silently and gazing out to sea. My uncle was deep in a small brown volume which he had produced from his pocket. Maud and I were seated in the stern beside Bunce, who, with characteristic self-assertion, had taken possession of the tiller; and amidships the Rector, his head sunk upon his breast, was slumbering peacefully. None of us had spoken a word for a long time. For my part, I found complete satisfaction in contemplating Maud, whose great gray eyes were fixed upon vacancy, and who was dreaming of I know not what;—certainly not of me. The stillness was broken only by the pleasant gurgling sound of the water through which the boat's bow was slowly cutting its way,—

“ A sound as of a hidden brook
In the leafy month of June,
That to the sleeping woods all night
Singeth a quiet tune.”

Suddenly the Rector startled us all by waking up and saying, in a clear and solemn voice, to my uncle: “ Be sure your sin will find you out ! ”

My uncle dropped his book, and stared ; I began to laugh ; and the General, turning his head, called out, “ Hullo, Mr. Dennison, you’ve been having a nap.”

“ Not at all,” returned the Rector, looking a good deal confused and annoyed ; “ nothing of the sort ! I was just thinking over my sermon for Sunday, and I believe I forgot where I was for the moment. Maud, my dear, will you remember to look out No. 29 for me when we get home ? I think I will give them 29 in the afternoon. They had it on Sexagesima ; but you can’t drive a nail home with one blow, and their skulls are very thick, poor things ! Besides, if I am to be carried off to sea, without with your leave or by your leave, I must not be expected to find time for writing two brand-new sermons in the week.”

"I don't remember to have heard you preach upon that text, though," observed my uncle.

"How should you, when you never come to afternoon church? Not that I mentioned my text; I was amplifying an incidental issue. At least, I may have been doing so: I don't quite remember," said the Rector, feeling, perhaps, that he was plunging into a slough of prevarication from which it might be well to extricate himself. "Bless me! Five o'clock already!" he exclaimed, consulting his watch. "Where is this ridiculous light-ship? What! Over there on the horizon, Bunce? You can't be serious! Le Marchant, we really ought to be getting about"

"Time enough, sir, time enough," said Bunce. "We shall have the breeze presently, shan't us, Jim?"

Castor and Pollux wheeled round simultaneously, scrutinised the sky, and growled out something in a deep bass about "working to the east'ard," and "plenty of it afore night," which, it must be presumed, was satisfactory; for Bunce rejoined triumphantly, "Telled 'ee so, sir! 'Taint often as you'll find me wrong about the weather, though I say it as shouldn't."

And, sure enough, the wind freshened considerably within the next five minutes, so that it took us barely half an hour to dispose of the five miles of water which still separated us from the light-ship. There had been some talk of our going on board of her, but when we lay to, on reaching our destination, there was found to be such an uncomfortable swell running that Willum was deputed to take off the newspapers and provisions in the dingy, none of us proposing to accompany him except Maud, who, perhaps, wished to take this opportunity of delivering a brief temperance lecture, but who was ordered peremptorily to sit still by her father.

The good Rector was evidently somewhat ruffled, either by the memory of his slip of the tongue or the increasing roughness of the sea, and no sooner were we under weigh once more than he began to shake his head ominously, and to declare that we should never reach Thirlby that night. This time Bunce did not contradict him; and indeed the wind, instead of working round to the eastward, had backed a point or two, and was now blowing dead in our teeth. Now it is one thing to sail before a strong breeze,

and quite another to beat up against it ; and by the time that we had been tossing and tumbling for the best part of an hour without making any perceptible progress, I feel sure that the Rector, for one, was by no means as much in love with the sea as he had been earlier in the afternoon. Maud had been carefully enveloped in an oilskin coat, and seemed rather to enjoy the showers of spray that broke over us ; while I, who have always been an excellent sailor—and, consequently, I fear, somewhat callous to the sufferings of others—took little heed of the deep gloom which had fallen upon the majority of our party, and only laughed when my uncle said in a low, sad voice, that, if this sort of thing was to continue much longer, he must request to be thrown overboard.

Presently, however, Bunce, who had been holding a whispered conference with his sons, bent forward to confide to me that he was uneasy in his mind. “ *I can work her back, sir ; no fear for that,*” he said ; “ *but the sea is a-gettin’ up, do you see, sir ; and if you ask me about puttin’ of you ashore—why, I don’t hardly know what to say.*”

"Surely we can manage to get ashore somewhere," I said.

"No doubt o' that, Mr. Chawls. Question is—where?"

"Bunce," struck in my uncle, "do you honestly think that there is the slightest chance of our being able to land anywhere within five miles of Thirlby?"

"Can't just exactly say as I do, sir—not for sartain."

"Then, in Heaven's name, get about, and run for Yarmouth. Don't let us go on thrashing in this horrible way a minute longer than is necessary!"

"As *you* please, Squire," replied Bunce, with evident relief. "Ready about, Willum! Slack out yer main-sheet!—There, sir, you feel a deal comfortabler now."

This last encouraging assurance was addressed to the Rector, who was looking rather yellow, but who immediately rejoined that he had been perfectly comfortable before, and that he did hope he was not going to be accused of having been sea-sick.

"Nobody could look at your face and bring

forward such a palpably absurd charge," said my uncle. "For my own part, I am convinced that you are as well as I am myself."

At this the General chuckled, and said he would tell us a capital story about the Duke of Wellington and a Dutch skipper. In point of fact, I believe, we were none of us sorry to be scudding before the wind again, and I know one member of the party to whom the prospect of a dinner at Yarmouth and a long fifteen-mile drive home was an unmixed delight.

Alas! I was reckoning without my host. We did indeed reach Yarmouth without misadventure of any kind, and the dinner to which we sat down at the Royal Hotel was a very cheery repast, if it was not particularly famous in point of cooking; but the remainder of the programme was executed in a way which was not my way, and which was the more mortifying for having been quite unanticipated by me. Having settled it in my own mind that I was to drive Maud home in a dog-cart, while the other four were to be accommodated in a two-horse fly, I had thoughtfully ordered these vehicles before sitting down to dinner; and I am sure that the sym-

pathies of all generous-minded readers will be with me when I say that not only did Miss Dennison refuse point-blank to accompany me, alleging that she hated dog-carts (which was not true), but that she and others further objected to any arrangement involving the packing of four persons into a close fly. Nor was this all; for after the rejected dog-cart had been taken back to the stables, and a second fly produced, Maud—whether to punish me for my presumption, or out of sheer perversity, I cannot say—stepped briskly into the first, followed by the General, and just as I was preparing to do likewise, struck me dumb by saying, “Mr. Warren is coming with us. Get in, George.”

George, with that stupid habit of his of always doing what he was told to do, promptly obeyed; and away they went, leaving me to seek the society of my uncle and the Rector with as good a grace as I could assume.

To tell the truth, I did not accept the situation with a good grace at all. I was not accustomed to being snubbed, and I didn't like it. Luckily for me, it was now pitch dark, so that my sulky face was not visible; and, as soon as

we had started, I sank back into a corner and pretended to go to sleep, feeling that speech was beyond my powers.

Neither of my companions appeared to notice that there was anything wrong with me, and no doubt they imagined my slumber to be genuine. We had driven some distance in the darkness before my uncle remarked quietly, as though resuming an interrupted conversation :

“ When you speak of my sin finding me out, you mean, I suppose, to imply that my mother is the instrument of Nemesis. Isn’t that a little hard upon her ? ”

“ Now, now, now, ” expostulated the Rector ; “ why go back upon things in that way ? It is most unfair to hold a man accountable for what he says in his sleep. Why, only the other day I was sitting by the bedside of a poor old woman, and I had read her nicely off to sleep with the First Lesson for the day—the twenty-fifth of Jeremiah, I think it was—and I was waiting there till her daughter came back from the baker’s, when she woke up all of a sudden, and said, ‘ The Devil fly away with them long-winded parsons ! ’ Now, do you suppose that I should

have the shabbiness to bring up a thing of that kind against her afterwards? I declare to goodness——”

“But I thought you denied that you had been asleep,” interrupted my uncle.

“Well, well; what if I did? Everybody denies having been asleep in daylight; it’s a natural impulse. I’ve heard you do it yourself scores of times.”

“I think not,” said my uncle.

“Le Marchant,” said the Rector, testily, “you are contradictory and argumentative. That’s just where it is, you see. If you and Mrs. Farquhar are to be splitting hairs from morning to night, your life won’t be worth having.”

“Perhaps we shall not behave in that way,” said my uncle. “It seems, however, that it *was* of my mother that you were thinking when you startled me by hurling that solemn warning at my head. Well, you are not alone in the view that you take of the matter. I confess that I am a little surprised; I did not expect you all to feel so strongly. Still, you may be wrong. Admitting that I am contradictory and argu-

mentative, as you say, I may not be too old to turn over a new leaf."

"My dear old friend," exclaimed the Rector, "you are neither the one nor the other, you know that very well. It is she who——"

"You must be going upon hearsay evidence, Dennison. I don't think you have met her more than once or twice in your life, and the last time must have been something like twenty years ago."

"I know what I am talking about for all that," declared the Rector. And, after a pause of a few seconds, he continued, in a somewhat changed voice. "See here, Le Marchant—you will allow an old friend to take a liberty just for once—can't you reconsider matters? Can't you let the dead past bury its dead, and start afresh?"

"No," said my uncle, quietly.

"Ah," sighed the Rector, "I am sorry to hear you say so. I don't understand you, Le Marchant. Of all the men I have ever met you are the least opinionated. You call yourself a Tory, and you take a positive pleasure in reading the Radical papers; you are, I hope, a good Churchman, and you would attend a Dissenting meeting without

a moment's hesitation ; you never make up your mind to do anything without hearing all that can be urged against it, even by ignorant and incompetent people. And yet——”

“And yet, when once I have made up my mind, I don't easily change it. Does that strike you as inconsistent?”

“I think it is strange,” answered the Rector ; “I think it is a thousand pities that—that, in short, you cannot forget as well as forgive. I do you the justice to feel sure that you forgave long ago, but there is a material as well as a moral kind of forgiveness.”

“And there are moral as well as material impossibilities. I would rather say no more about it, Dennison, if you please.”

“Ah, well ! I fear it is a bad look-out,” said the Rector. “Of course Mrs. Farquhar must be against you in this ; and equally, of course, she will tell you so—in season and out of season.”

My uncle laughed a little. “You know my mother better than I do, if you can be so certain as to what she will say or do under any given circumstances.”

"I take her to be a human being like other human beings," said the Rector.

"Tom would tell you that that only shows how little you know about her. I am glad, however, to find that you are less prejudiced against her than I had supposed. I have not yet made up my mind that she will live at Thirlby. As you say, I like to hear all the pros and cons before I come to a decision, and I have taken note of the fact that both Tom and Charley are strongly opposed to her coming. Nevertheless, I think the end of it will be that she will come ; and I want you, if she does, to be civil and kind to her."

"Am I uncivil and unkind as a rule ?" the Rector asked.

"I don't say so ; but my hope is that you will be specially the reverse in this instance. Do what we will, there must be rubs ; and I don't think they will be the more easily smoothed over if everybody is determined to take my side. Let us at least have a fair start ; and perhaps it would be only fair also to remember that, if my mother leaves Scotland, she will do so against her personal inclinations."

The Rector was about to make some rejoinder ; but at this moment the fly stopped at a turnpike gate, and the pikeman coming out with a lantern to get his money, I took that opportunity of becoming evidently awake. I had already made a compromise with my conscience by shuffling my feet and coughing gently once or twice ; but these signals had passed unnoticed, and it was only now that the Rector. remarked innocently, "Bless me, Charley ! I had forgotten you were here."





CHAPTER V.

MRS. FARQUHAR PLAYS ACCORDING TO RULE.

To be spoken well of on all sides is not, as every one must have observed, quite an unmixed advantage. It is apt to stir up antagonism, to set criticism on the watch, to provoke envy, a spirit of detraction, and other natural, if ignoble, sentiments; and when once a man has achieved a universal character for benevolence, impartiality, wit, or what not, he may be tolerably certain that his one and only chance of maintaining the same is to die forthwith. For the good opinion of humanity—which may or may not be a prize worth straining after, but which is one that, as a matter of fact, we most of us do strain after—is not unlike a handicap; every competitor for it being weighted in accordance with his previous performances or supposed qualities; and it should be a consolation to unpopular persons to reflect

that a very trifling effort on their part is sure to meet with prompt and grateful recognition. The miser who was once seen to give half-a-crown to a crossing-sweeper, the murderer who cherished a tender affection for canaries and guinea-pigs, "the most disagreeable man in England" (there would appear to be several duplicates of this unfortunate gentleman), who was once known to go 'out of his way to say a kind thing of an opponent—are not these quoted quite as frequently in conversation as the great philanthropist who raises his tenants' rents, the upright statesman who never pays his bills, and the saintly cleric who habitually eats more than is good for him at dinner? Perhaps it is because the enormous majority of us are ourselves so hopelessly middling that we are so impatient of extremes, and delight in discovering tufts of dark hairs upon the snowiest fleece, or streaks of gray upon the devil's coat of black paint.

And so, after all that had been said and hinted against Mrs. Farquhar in my presence, it was scarcely surprising that, when at last she appeared upon the scene, I should have received, in spite of myself, a much pleasanter

impression of her than I might otherwise have done.

It was on a dull afternoon in September that the dreaded disturber of our peace descended upon us. My uncle drove off to the station to meet her, while the General and I went out shooting, and remained out until the light became so bad that it was impossible to delay our return any longer. We had given up talking about Mrs. Farquhar for some time past, and we did not depart from our rule upon the present occasion; but there was a tacit understanding between us that it would be well to shirk as much as we conveniently could of that awkward interval which separates the arrival of a guest from the dinner-hour. The General was silent and out of spirits, and had shot badly all the afternoon. Possibly his conscience may have been reproaching him with his desertion to the enemy, or it may be that he was looking forward with some apprehension to the meeting which must shortly take place. I myself was depressed, feeling as if the last of all the good old days was drawing to its close, and I also was a little afraid of that meeting. I don't know why I was afraid, nor

exactly what my anticipations were ; but I well remember that the meeting, when it came, was something altogether unlike what I had expected.

We crossed the dark hall and entered the library, where a cheerful fire was blazing, and where the sudden flood of light set us winking and blinking. The General was the first to cross the threshold ; and hardly had he done so when I, peering over his shoulder, saw a little black figure rise up from the fireside and hurry forward, with arms outspread.

A rather shrill, but not ungentle voice, exclaimed, with a slight Scotch accent, " Eh, Tom, is it you ?"—and immediately the General was being kissed and embraced. He had to bend himself almost double in order to render this operation possible, and while it was going on, all that I saw of Mrs. Farquhar was a small portion of an arm and a diminutive white hand, covered with flashing jewels, which beat a gentle accompaniment on the General's shoulder to certain indistinct but affectionate words.

" Well, mother, so you've got over the journey all right," was all that the General said, as he disengaged himself.

It was now my turn. "Can this be Charley?" Mrs. Farquhar exclaimed, looking up into my face, while she took possession of my hand. And I was very nearly retorting, "Can this be Mrs. Farquhar?"—for in truth she was an extremely pretty and agreeable-looking old lady, and it was difficult at first sight to trace any connection between the outward aspect of her and that cantankerous disposition with which I had been led to infer that she was afflicted.

My eyes having by this time become accustomed to the light, I was able to take notice of hers, which were brown in colour, and as bright as a squirrel's. Her abundant gray hair formed a frame for a sharp little face, which might probably have had but small claims to beauty in its youth, but which, to the different order of criticism applicable to old age, presented no defect, unless it were the somewhat exaggerated length of the upper lip. She was, of course, dressed in widow's weeds, a garb far more uncompromisingly ugly in those days than it is now; but the sweeping black robes suited her small, spare figure well enough, and even the close-fitting white cap, with its broad strings, which no widow of the year

1851 would have dared to modify, was not unbecoming to her, as it would have been to a younger woman.

Attractive though she was, however, I was not desirous of being embraced by her ; for I was at that time of life when a young man dislikes nothing so much as being kissed by his female relatives. Therefore I did not bend down like my predecessor, but held myself up to my natural height of six foot two above the level of the carpet, an altitude which rendered all surprises on the part of a lady of Mrs. Farquhar's inches impracticable. She was so considerate as to make no attempt of the kind that I feared, and contented herself with holding my hand in one of hers, while she patted it gently with the other, murmuring, "A fine young fellow, indeed ! Dear, dear, how time goes on ! The last time I saw you, you were a baby—just a baby ; and now you are a great tall man, and you've been captain of the Eton eight, as I read in the newspapers. That is something to be proud of, Bernard"—turning quickly round upon my uncle—"I am sure you must be proud of this young gentleman."

"If I am," said my uncle, laughing, "I take good care not to tell him so."

"Oh, aye; you are a pessimist," returned Mrs. Farquhar, gaily; "but I am all for giving credit where credit is due."

Now my uncle was not a pessimist, nor had he ever been known to grudge any man his due; but the general tone of Mrs. Farquhar's remarks appeared to me to be so pleasant and sensible that I was not disposed for cavilling. I should have imagined that a tolerably widespread ignorance prevailed in Scotland upon the subject of the Eton eight and the glory of rowing stroke therein, and I was naturally glad to find that this was not so. I modestly gave Mrs. Farquhar to understand that the high honours to which I had attained were due not so much to inherent genius as to unremitting labour. Lots of other fellows, I said, might have turned out far better oars than I could ever hope to be, but they wouldn't give their whole minds to it, and, of course, if a fellow wouldn't give his whole mind to a thing——

At this my uncle and the General burst out laughing, and Mrs. Farquhar, after a moment,

joined in their laughter. "Oh, I know what you're meaning, both of you," said she; "you think he should be giving his mind to his books. But, dear me! he has his whole life before him for study, and he has only just these few years to be young in. I say he is right to make the most of youth while it lasts."

How true! I began to feel that Mrs. Farquhar was almost a kindred spirit; and in another five minutes we were all seated round the fire, chatting in as friendly a fashion as if we had really been what we appeared to be—a cheerful family party. And in this condition of unity, peace, and concord, we continued throughout the evening. There were one or two slight awkwardnesses; but they were so slight that I should hardly have noticed them if I had not been on the look-out for something of the kind. Several times during dinner Mrs. Farquhar flatly contradicted my uncle, and in the drawing-room afterwards she contradicted us all round upon I forget what political question, although our several views with regard to it did not happen to resemble one another.

"Oh, but that is nonsense—just nonsense!"

she said, when my uncle endeavoured to explain his reasons for holding certain opinions.

It sounded a little rude ; but in that, as in previous instances, she spoke so placidly and good-humouredly that no one could suppose any offence to be meant. I said to myself that perhaps people in Scotland were in the habit of contradicting each other by way of making conversation—and, indeed, I have formed more erroneous surmises than that in my life.

I was left for a few minutes alone with my uncle before I bade him good-night ; and he said : “ You see, Charley, my mother is not an ogress, after all.”

“ I think she is very nice,” I admitted, rather reluctantly.

“ Yes ; you may remember that I told you you would think so. And she has confided to me that she thinks you very nice too. So all is for the best.”

And really it did seem as though all were going to be for the best. Very likely I might not have taken so kindly to Mrs. Farquhar had she not taken kindly to me, and shown in the plainest possible manner that she had done so.

During the next three days she lost no opportunity of patting me on the back and flattering my youthful vanity ; and this, perhaps, caused me to overlook some acts of interference which I should otherwise have indignantly resented.

“ Bernard, do you never have family prayers ? ” she asked, the very first morning at breakfast.

My uncle confessed that such had not been his custom.

“ Oh, but I think you should,” she said.

“ A man must please himself about such matters,” struck in the General boldly.

“ Now, Tom, that is so like you ! A thing is right, or it is wrong ; and if we profess and call ourselves Christians, we ought certainly to set an example of religion to our servants.”

“ I dare say you are right,” my uncle said. And thenceforth family prayers became an institution at Thirlby.

Many people may be disposed to think that Mrs. Farquhar was justified in upholding her testimony with regard to this particular innovation ; but it will be allowed that, when she went on to alter the hours of breakfast and dinner she was making herself a little too much at home.

Nevertheless, this change also was accomplished without opposition or audible murmur.

For the rest, Mrs. Farquhar (who, to be sure, had had everything her own way so far) made herself very agreeable to all about her, high and low ; and, since nobody had yet been instructed to regard her as a permanent inmate, her mild tyranny was accepted submissively enough. I may confess that, for my own part, I was alive to the advantage of having a lady in the house for the next few weeks ; for I foresaw that she and Maud would become firm allies, and that, as a consequence, the latter might be expected to visit the Hall a great deal more frequently than she had done heretofore.

But here my prescience was at fault ; for it is one of those mysterious facts which only a profound student of feminine nature can explain, that Mrs. Farquhar did not take to Maud at all. The Rector and his daughter came to dinner on the fourth day, and I don't think they had been ten minutes in the drawing-room before the two ladies had a trifling difference. It was about some parish matter—I don't remember what ; but I do remember perfectly the tone of kindly

reproof in which Mrs. Farquhar said : " My dear, when you are a little older you will know better." Maud smiled, and made no reply ; but I know very well (in spite of subsequent assertions of hers to the contrary) that from that moment she cordially detested the little old lady whose presence among us she had declared to be so desirable.

I could not resist taking the first opportunity that offered of asking her whether Mrs. Farquhar came up to her expectations. This was after dinner, in the drawing-room, to which vast and rather melancholy apartment we had adjourned, as it was a company night, instead of to the more cheerful library. The four elders had just sat down to whist at an old-fashioned, spindle-legged table, and I placed myself beside Maud on a sofa at some little distance from them.

" Quite. In fact, she surpasses them," said Maud, in answer to my question.

" I dare say ; but in what sense ? For the better or for the worse ? "

" Oh, for the better, I suppose. That is, she seems to me to be better suited for her mission than I thought she would be. Evidently she

knows how to assert herself, and is capable of snubbing people, too, when necessary. And that, you know, is a valuable gift, under certain circumstances."

"So it is," I agreed; "and what makes it the more valuable in Mrs. Farquhar's case is that she uses it with so much discrimination. She likes me; she hasn't ceased to say sweet things of and to me since she entered the house. Other people, as you know, have not been so fortunate; and I shouldn't wonder if other people were feeling a little bit sore in consequence." The truth was that I had not yet quite forgiven my companion for having driven off and left me in the lurch at Yarmouth in that cruel way.

"My dear Charley," she answered, "do you really suppose that I care two straws whether Mrs. Farquhar likes me or not? I hoped that she would come and live here, and I hope so still; but I never contemplated her in the light of an addition to my personal happiness. I am perfectly disinterested in the matter."

"You are not half pleased with her, all the same," I persisted.

“She was rude to me, and of course one is never exactly pleased with rude people ; but I shouldn’t have minded that, if she had not been entirely in the wrong. There is nothing more trying to the patience than to be seriously told that black is white by a person who is too old to be contradicted.”

“And it is that wrong-headed old person whom you wish to inflict upon my poor uncle and me as a permanent penance ! What have we done that you should be so hard upon us ?”

Maud made no reply. She was resting her chin upon the top of her closed fan, and gazing meditatively towards the card-table, where Mrs. Farquhar was smiling the smile of conscious rectitude, undismayed by ill-fortune. My uncle and the General, who were partners, were smiling too ; but theirs was the smile of victory. As for the Rector, his back was turned to us ; but every now and again there was wafted towards us from the direction of his chair a low, wailing murmur which told its own tale.

“I can understand,” said Maud, suddenly, “that a woman like that might be a great power. A little brain, which would be quite filled up by

one idea at a time, a great deal of conceit, and I should think, illimitable obstinacy. You may say that all she can do is to raise a storm in a tea-cup. But then you happen to live in the tea-cup. I am glad she likes you, Charley. You must keep friends with her, or she may do you an ill turn one of these days."

"What in the world makes you say that?" I asked, in some astonishment.

"I can't tell you. There is something wrong—some mystery or other; and my father seems to think that trouble may come out of it; though I can't get him to explain himself."

"I know there's a mystery," I said.

"Do you? And can you guess what it is?" asked Maud, eagerly.

"Not in the least. Can you?"

"No;—at least I don't think so. But it concerns you in some way; and I want you to keep yourself in Mrs. Farquhar's good graces, Charley, because she means to stay here, and because it is certain that she will rule Mr. Le Marchant absolutely in the course of a few months."

"How do you know that she means to stay here?" I asked.

But her reply, if she made one, was drowned in a cry of agony which arose at that moment from the card-table.

"My dear madam!—Oh, my dear madam, how *could* you! We had the game to a mathematical certainty!—and then to throw it away by trumping second in hand in that—I must say that insane manner! Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!"

The General threw himself back in his chair, and made the room ring with peal after peal of merriment. "Ho, ho, ho! I beg your pardon, mother, I'm sure; but your partner's face—ha, ha, ha!"

"I did the right thing," said Mrs. Farquhar, not at all perturbed by all this commotion; "I played according to rule, which is the only real way to play."

"A rule to trump second in hand!" ejaculated the Rector, aghast.

"I don't exactly remember how the cards went; but I played according to rule, I know, because I always do. You must just make up your mind to lose a game sometimes, Mr. Dennison, like everybody else."

The Rector only groaned as he took up his cards. Presently the game was resumed, and I returned to my interrupted conversation with Maud.

"How do you know," I asked again, "that Mrs. Farquhar intends to stay here? And why are you so anxious that I should keep upon good terms with her?"

But Maud had recovered her wonted serenity now, and no longer chose to deal in prophecies. "I don't know that Mrs. Farquhar will stay," she answered; "but it seems natural and probable that she should. And it is always best to be on good terms with your neighbours."

"I tell you what," I said, "I suspect that I am a great deal more likely to remain upon good terms with this old woman than you are. You haven't made a particularly promising start, but I hope you won't be discouraged by that, but will come and see her very often, and show us a bright example of kindly behaviour towards the aged."

"I should be delighted," answered Maud; "but unfortunately I am going away in a few days, so you will have to try and behave yourselves properly without me."

"Going away!" I exclaimed, in horror and amazement; "how can you say such dreadful things in that calm tone of voice! Where are you going?—and for how long?"

"I am going to stay with my aunt, Mrs. Saville," she answered. "I don't quite know how long I may be away; it will depend upon my father, who has been persuaded to take a holiday for a parson's three weeks and come with me. The Savilles want me to stay with them until after some dances which are to come off in the beginning of November; but most likely I shall come back when my father does. I foresee that parochial and domestic duties will beckon me away from the giddy throng."

"It makes no difference to me," I said, ruefully; "because, in any case, I shall have gone to Oxford before you come back. This is an awful blow!" But in my heart I was selfish enough to find a grain of comfort in the thought of Maud's probable inability to dance with the gay bachelors of Surrey.

"You must summon up all your strength and endeavour to bear it," she answered, with an unfeeling laugh. "You are going to lose me

for a time, but Mrs. Farquhar will remain to you by way of compensation."

"I wish Mrs. Farquhar was dead and buried!" I was beginning; but before I could finish my sentence another exclamation of dismay caused us both to turn our eyes once more towards the card-table.

"She's done it again!" cried the Rector, whisking round in his chair, and appealing piteously to space. "So help me—ahem!—ten men and a boy, she's done it again! Now, did you ever in all your born days!—Ah, yes, of course!—there it is, you see—they get the odd trick. Well, I really could not have believed that any responsible human being——"

Maud rose and crossed the room hastily. The Rector, when he was at all excited, had an unfortunate habit of thinking aloud, and there was no saying to what lengths he might not be about to go. She put her hands on his shoulders, and bent down over him, examining the cards which he had thrown upon the table, while the General, in a voice trembling with suppressed laughter, called out, "Single, treble, and the rub!"

"The cards have been against us the whole

evening, and that is always a trying thing to the patience ; but we should not lose our temper over a mere game," said Mrs. Farquhar kindly, but a trifle severely. "As for me, I just play according to rule."

After this everybody rose from the card-table, and Maud, pointing out that it was past eleven o'clock, prepared to march her father off home. The Rector, however, was not to be restrained from the utterance of a few last words.

"Good-night, Mrs Farquhar, good-night," he said. "I have no doubt they play that game in Scotland ; and it may be a very amusing game when you understand it. But it is not whist." And with that he decamped precipitately, allowing his late partner no time to make a rejoinder.

She, for her part, did not appear to be offended—and, indeed, I found out afterwards that Mrs. Farquhar was not one to take offence readily. All that she said, after the Rector had left us, was, "He's a worthy kind of man, that Mr. Dennison. Not very wise, I daresay ; but one does not look for wisdom in these parts.

I've no great opinion of the daughter—a consequential young miss, full of airs and graces."

"Perhaps she may improve as she grows older," said my uncle, quietly; while I gulped down the indignant retort that rose to my lips, and the General, who was putting the cards away, called out: "You're all wrong, mother. Miss Maud is no more consequential than I am; and if ever there was a girl who had not a trace of what you call 'airs and graces' about her, it is she."

"So you think," returned Mrs. Farquhar, smiling compassionately. "You never look below the surface, Tom; if a woman is pretty, that is all you ask of her. Not that I would call Miss Dennison pretty myself, but she has fine eyes, and that is quite enough for you. Maybe, as Bernard says, she'll improve as she grows older; but if she had green eyes, or if she squinted, you would see plainly enough that she is nothing but a silly and forward girl now."

The General and his mother had a long and heated discussion upon this point, shaking their bedroom candlesticks at each other, and gradually

drifting into a controversy with which Miss Dennison had nothing whatever to do. They wrangled the whole way across the hall and up to the first landing of the staircase, where they parted, Mrs. Farquhar, of course, getting the last word.

“Well, well, I never argue,” said she (after having argued for a matter of twenty minutes), “and I don’t exactly know what you are talking about, Tom; but I am very sure of one thing, and that is that you are in the wrong.”

And then the General came down and joined us, looking quite ruffled and angry, and could not see what my uncle found to laugh at in it.

Contrary to his own anticipations, it proved to be the General, not my uncle, who found it impossible to get on with the old lady. “I’ll tell you what it is, Charley, my boy,” he said to me, after a few days, “I must be off. I should have liked to stay another week or so with you, and to do a little justice to old Bunce’s pheasants, but the fact of the matter is that at my time of life a man’s temper is apt to become a little uncertain, and I find that I can’t stand being

called an infernal ass half a dozen times in the course of the day."

Now, I need hardly say that Mrs. Farquhar had never made use of the above unseemly expression in addressing her son, but she had certainly been extremely aggravating, and had more than once contrived to put the General, who was one of the best-tempered men in the world, into a downright rage. And this always appeared to astonish her beyond everything. "Poor Tom seems very irritable," she would say. "Is it gout, do you think?"

She herself was not in the least irritable, and never lost her temper. She was tolerably pleasant to my uncle, and quite affectionate to me, and I should be sorry to swear that she intended to be disagreeable even to the General. But she *was* disagreeable—so persistently, quietly, smilingly disagreeable, that at last the poor man could bear it no longer, and took to his heels.

Almost immediately afterwards the Rector and Maud departed for Surrey, and bore away, as it seemed to me, the last of the summer and sunshine with them. Chill October fell upon us with alternate fogs and gales; the pleasant

holiday time was over and gone, and the pheasants brought little comfort to my bereaved heart. George Warren was no sort of comfort either. I used to pour my tale of woe into his patient ear as we trudged home after shooting in the misty evenings, and he annoyed me excessively by prophesying that I should soon forget it all among the manifold excitements and recreations of Christ Church. He himself was at Oriel—a quiet member of a quiet reading set—“and of course,” he would say, in his calm, matter-of-fact way, “you and I shall not see very much of one another, Charley. You’ll find yourself among a fastish lot of men, most of whom will have a great deal more money to spend than you have, and as many of them are old Eton fellows, who know you already and like you, you will become popular, and I shouldn’t wonder if your head were to be a little turned at first. But I shall look to the river to keep you out of serious mischief.”

There was a tacit assumption of superior age and wisdom in speeches like this which was of itself sufficiently offensive; but what was still worse was the insinuation that nothing more

than the honour of a free pass into a certain coterie would be required to dazzle my eyes and deaden my memory. Just as if I were a swaggering young snob, who would be likely to give himself airs upon the strength of being a gentleman-commoner! Now, was I given to swagger? I asked George, indignantly; and he, being a perfectly truthful man, replied that he thought I was—rather. “There is a kind of swagger, though,” he added, apologetically, “which sits not ungracefully upon some young fellows; and, after all, so long as your heart is in the right place——”

“But you won’t allow that my heart is in the right place,” I interrupted; “you don’t seem to believe that it belongs wholly to Maud.”

“Oh, I wasn’t speaking of your heart in that limited sense,” he remarked.

“Limited indeed!” quoth I; “I tell you there are no limits to love, when it is real love. You have never felt it, so you can’t understand it—

“But follow, follow round the world,
The green earth and the sea;
So love is with the lover’s heart,
Wherever he may be!”

“H’m!—well; I don’t know, I’m sure,” said George. “Lovers do change their minds sometimes, you know. At least, so I have been told.”

But my friend dropped this cynical and sceptical tone when he found that I was really hurt by it, and hastened to make amends by presenting me with a charming little water-colour sketch of Maud, which he drew from memory, and which was really a very fair likeness. I have it now. It forms part of the collection of treasures to which I have already made passing allusion, and it represents a young lady whom the reader of the present day would probably snigger at in a foolish manner, because, forsooth, her hair is dressed in a forgotten style. I must really begin to think about burning that collection of mine. Who knows on what day King Death may not step in, and graciously present all my goods and chattels to my “hard heir?” I apologise to the young gentleman in question for calling him hard—to the best of my belief he is no harder than his neighbours—but I don’t wish him to examine the contents of that box, all the same.

The original of the portrait did not return to Thirlby before my departure, as I had had a faint hope that she might do; and, as she did not come, I was rather glad to go. I caught my uncle looking at me a little wistfully once or twice in the course of the last evening; but he did not say much, only begging me not to waste my time utterly, and to remember that a University was, after all, a place of education.

"He'll do well enough, never fear!" Mrs. Farquhar struck in. "Let him enjoy himself and make friends, so that he may not be alone in the world when he is growing old, like some folks. The Latin and Greek will take care of themselves. It is not as though he had to earn his own bread, you see."

"Excuse me, mother," replied my uncle, "but that is exactly what he will have to do."

"I think not," said Mrs. Farquhar, smiling and nodding at me; and my uncle looked rather put out for a moment.

It had now been practically, though not ostensibly, arranged that Mrs. Farquhar was to leave Thirlby no more. My uncle gave me to understand as much the same evening, adding,

with a slight smile, that he hoped I had changed my opinion upon the subject.

I answered frankly that to a certain extent I had. I still thought that third persons were a mistake; but at the same time I was bound to say that, personally, I had found Mrs. Farquhar kind and agreeable. "What do you think yourself, Uncle Bernard?" I asked. "Will she be a great bore to you?"

He considered for a few moments, and then answered quietly: "Yes. I don't mind confessing to you, Charley, that she will. But that is my fault, not hers; and I don't think we shall quarrel."

"I am quite sure that it will be her fault, not yours, if you do," said I. And that was all that came of my firm opposition.





CHAPTER VI.

HOT WATER AND COLD.

THE golden mediocrity which has ever characterised me and all my ways prevented me from achieving distinction of any kind, good or bad, during my first term at Oxford. I read a little—a very little; I enjoyed myself a great deal; and every evening, before going to bed, I took out that water-colour sketch of Maud, and sighed over it for quite five minutes. I went in for all attainable amusements; but then (as I pointed out to George, who would sometimes bear down upon me with a censorious face), I did not abuse them. We used to throw the dice in those days; we were fond of arraying ourselves in waistcoats of brilliant design; we followed the hounds—for the most part upon hired screws—and some of us believed ourselves to be such consummate whips that nothing but driving tandem would

serve us. I did all of these things, but not in such a manner as to make myself conspicuous; and it will be seen that, with the exception of the first, they were innocent pastimes enough. I was, in short, so exactly like other young men, and my life at Oxford so completely resembled their lives, that it seems hardly worth while to say another word about the matter.

But if no change was wrought in me or my experience by the substitution of Oxford for Eton, it was otherwise with the inhabitants of Thirlby, whose social history was just now entering upon the revolutionary era which so often succeeds to long periods of stagnation. I heard nothing about it at the time, my sole correspondent being a reticent person, who never cared to dwell upon matters whereby he was disagreeably affected; but afterwards I received various accounts from various quarters of what all were agreed was an unmingled calamity for the parish. It was Mrs. Farquhar's fault from beginning to end, my informants declared; but, as an impartial historian, I feel bound to record my conviction that, if Mrs. Farquhar had been alone and unopposed, matters would have passed off much

more smoothly, and some useful little reforms would have been effected without any great disturbance. For Mrs. Farquhar was like some statesmen whom I have heard of, who turn things topsy-turvy, not so much because they are consumed by an ardent love of progress as because they have a rival, whose mines they find it absolutely necessary to countermine, and whose glory must at all hazards be outshone. One reformer may be accepted with resignation, and even with a modicum of thankfulness ; but when two reformers appear in the field it is a poor look-out for peaceable and conservative people.

Now all the acts of Miss Maud Dennison, and the poor whom she relieved, and the drunkards whom she reclaimed, and the heads of families whom she brought to attend the services of the Church, have they not been fully chronicled in a previous chapter ? These were noble and praiseworthy deeds ; and, as a matter of abstract speculation, I say that Mrs. Farquhar would probably have done as much—or nearly as much—and no more, had not Maud unfortunately anticipated her. But that an energetic and God-fearing lady of seventy-five should sit still, with her

hands before her, and allow a mere chit of a girl to usurp all authority over the surrounding district, together with the prestige resulting from the same, was what no reasonable person could expect. Accordingly, no sooner had Maud returned home from Surrey than Mrs. Farquhar furbished up her arms and prepared to descend into the arena.

First she struck a blow at the Establishment. For three consecutive Sundays she went to church, and sat in the square family pew opposite the pulpit, determined to give the Rector a fair hearing, and on the third Sunday she definitively summed up against him. On the fourth Sunday she drove down to the village, and, in the sight of the sun and within hearing of the church bells, marched into the little red-brick chapel which had been lately erected by the members of the Baptist Connection. This was a truly scandalous thing to do; and Mrs. Farquhar did not lessen the scandal by explaining audibly to Lady Welby and others that the preaching of "that unfortunate Mr. Dennison" was "just intolerable." But she did not stop short at that. Thirlby Church was a spacious edifice, which

never, at the best of times, was more than half filled, and it had been evident to Maud that the congregation—unlike the power of the British Crown at a certain famous period—had diminished, was diminishing, and ought to be increased. Now I am afraid there can be no doubt that the means adopted to secure this desirable result had not in every case been of the purest kind. There had not, perhaps, been anything amounting to what an election commissioner would consider direct bribery; but it is a fact that doles of tea, tobacco, and snuff had been distributed to some aged parishioners who had suddenly taken to church-going, while more than one hardened Daddy Longlegs, who could not be prevailed upon to say his prayers at any price, was conspicuously left out in the cold. Mrs. Farquhar found out all about this, and declared that such methods of dealing with the poor were worthy of the worst days of the Inquisition. If we could not look for edification or spiritual encouragement from the pastor of the flock, she said, let us at least have religious toleration. Let us not put a premium upon hypocrisy. Let us not descend to such unworthy shifts as pampering the body in order to make a

fair show of having saved the soul. Her subsequent behaviour was marked by that calm and astounding inconsistency to which she owed her greatest successes. She actually set to work to outbid Maud. First of all she got hold of the devout parishioners aforesaid, and saturated their whole systems with tea, tobacco, and snuff, till they were ready to promise anything; then she attacked the recalcitrant ones, and—to use Bunce's forcible, if somewhat coarse, expression—"skeered the livers out of 'em" with vivid pictures of a future place of torment. After which they also received creature comforts; and the end of it was that the parish church became more empty than ever, while Ebenezer was filled to overflowing. I regret to add that in this brief and brilliant campaign Mrs. Farquhar was ably seconded by that firebrand, Mrs. Bunce, who, to be sure, was a Dissenter herself, but who was probably actuated in this instance by sheer pugnacity and love of rebellion against constituted authorities. This was the beginning of the great Farquhar-Bunce schism, whereby the parish of Thirlby was distracted long after the originators of the controversy had fallen out and become deadly enemies—which

latter event, indeed, occurred within the space of a very few weeks.

When Mrs. Farquhar had succeeded in setting the whole of that little world by the ears, and in stirring up universal dissension as well as dissent, she was comfortable and contented, feeling that she had done her duty. For she was one of those thrice-happy people who always believe that they are doing their duty, and who follow the dictates of their own sweet will with the most thorough conscientiousness. She did not mean to work mischief: on the contrary, it was her earnest desire to do good; but she could not let sleeping dogs lie. The sight of a sleeping dog irritated her beyond everything. Her first impulse (and she invariably acted upon her first impulse) was to kick him; and if he jumped up and bit her, she rather liked it.

After having harassed the Church, she turned her attention to secular matters, and began to overhaul my uncle's accounts. Then arose a terrible disturbance. Peculation, it appeared, had been going on for years—peculation and malversation, and goodness knows what else besides. Perquisites here, perquisites there!

—Mrs. Farquhar was horrified, and vowed that such a state of things could not be allowed to go on for another hour. My uncle absolutely declined to take any action in the matter; he tried to imitate Gallio, while Thompson, the bailiff, and Mrs. Peters, the housekeeper, were dragged and beaten before the judgment-seat, so to speak; but it wouldn't do. He had to step down and take a side; and the side that he took was that of the accused. Hence arose wars and fightings, which would assuredly have ended in bringing about a resignation *en masse* of the servants, had not these been really attached to their master—and also, no doubt, to their place, which was an easy and profitable one. Mrs. Farquhar was unsuccessful here; but, alas! she was not disheartened; and what my poor uncle must have suffered from her at this time I shudder to think of. By some means or other she obtained possession of a certain little red volume, known as “Bunce’s Book,” which, as I well recollect, used to be brought up to the Hall once a month, and which set forth in a bold and phonetic style of orthography the expenses incurred during the previous four weeks in the

preservation of game and in "hod jobbs" (I quote from the original). So shocked was Mrs. Farquhar by the statistics thus laid bare before her that she wasted no time in vain remonstrances with Bunce's employer, but marched straight off to the cottage of the delinquent himself—where, by all accounts, she met her match. Bunce, who was nothing if not independent, and who, according to his own code, was as honest as the day, was the last man in the world to sit still and hear himself called a thief. He gave Mrs. Farquhar his opinion of her in a few well-chosen words, held open his garden gate for her to walk out, and then, having allowed her ten minutes' start, proceeded up to the Hall, where he saw my uncle, and requested to be relieved of his functions. A stormy scene ensued, in the course of which I believe that Mrs. Farquhar actually shed tears of mortification; from which I am led to conclude that Bunce must have hit her very hard indeed. She partly withdrew her accusations at length; but Bunce could by no means be persuaded to withdraw his resignation; and the upshot of it was that my uncle was compelled to order him out of the room, saying that the

matter should be more fully discussed between them in private, and when they should both be a little less heated.

It was at this juncture that I returned home for Christmas, and great was my wrath on hearing of the tribulation into which my old friend had fallen. My uncle told me about it in the evening, laughing a little, in spite of his vexation.

"I am afraid my mother is very angry," he said; "though really she brought it all upon herself. Of course Bunce does not mean to go; but, to tell the truth, he was extremely insolent, and I cannot allow him to give his tongue such freedom. So I have not held any communication with him for three whole days, and I trust that he is now beginning to be frightened. You and I will go down and see him to-morrow, Charley, and put matters straight."

"I wish Mrs. Farquhar would mind her own business," I exclaimed, angrily.

"My dear boy, you can't wish it more devoutly than I do, but as you grow older you will be surprised to find how very few people do mind their own business. After all, one must judge by motives, not by words or actions."

I held a diametrically opposite opinion, and I said so, but my uncle only smiled and changed the subject.

Immediately after breakfast the next morning we started on our mission of peace. The weather was bright and frosty. As we made our way across the hard-frozen fields, the whole of the wide bare landscape around us stood out in sharp black and white, and every distant object seemed close at hand. Among other distant objects we descried Bunce, who was standing on a ladder, propped against the side of the wooden lean-to which adjoined his dwelling, and was hammering vigorously at some started planks. I have not the slightest doubt but that he was perfectly well aware of our approach, for he had the sharpest eyes and ears in the county ; but he was pleased to ignore us, and remained elaborately unconscious even when we had reached his garden gate.

Mrs. Bunce came hurrying out to receive us, dropping curtseys at every step, and the ceremonious politeness of her manner was such that it was evident that she meant mischief. Her sleeves were rolled up above her elbows, and

she explained how grieved she was that she was having a thorough clean up of her pore place afore leavin' of it for good, and consequently could not ask us to honour her by stepping inside and taking a cheer. She then informed herself minutely as to the state of my health, returned pious thanks to Heaven on hearing that I had never been better in my life, and expressed a hope that I might be spared for many years to be a comfort to my uncle, who, she was kind enough to add, deserved a deal more comfort out of life than he got. All this time her husband, with his back turned towards us, was hammering away for dear life, making as much noise as a whole gang of shipwrights in a dock-yard.

"Bunce!" called out Mrs. Bunce, softly, "come down d'reckly, will you? Here's—drat the man! I do b'lieve he gets a little hard o' hearin'. We're none of us so young as we once was, sir, and what we're to do for to make a livin' when we leave this Providence alone can tell, though Bunce he's a active man for his years, and hard workin'—Lord! I never see such a man for work. Wears hisself out, I

tell him, but he don't pay no heed to me. Might I make so bold as to ask, sir, whether you've found a new keeper yet? Bunce he did hear of a young man as might be sootable, though a little given to drink at times, they tell me, and experience, of course, he have not got it. But, there, it's that difficult to meet with a experienced keeper nowadays——"

"So difficult, Mrs. Bunce," interrupted my uncle, "that I have not the slightest intention of looking out for one. If you will kindly induce your husband to stop making that noise and come down, I shall be able to convince him, I hope, that there is no need for us to part."

Mrs. Bunce shook her head mournfully. "He's terrible obstinate, sir," she said, "and full o' sinful pride, as I've told him many and many's the time. 'Mark my word,' says I, 'pride 'll have a fall.' And sure enough I was right, you see, sir, for if it isn't enough to abase any man's pride to be likened to a common pick-pocket—and that by a stranger, as you may say——"

"Come, come, Mrs. Bunce," broke in my uncle, "if we are to be called bad names, it is

surely better to receive them from those who don't know us than from those who do. But Mrs. Farquhar never meant to call your husband a pickpocket; and if she said more than she should have done, so did he. I think he must admit that.

"So I telled him, sir, so I telled him," answered Mrs. Bunce, raising her voice a little. "'The idear,' I says, 'o' your speakin' up to your betters like that! Why, you ought to be 'shamed o' yourself! Don't you know,' I says, 'that 'twas your dooty as a Christian, let alone a keeper, to hold your tongue and allow the lady to say what she pleased? What if she did tell you you was dishonest?—you that wouldn't take a farden as didn't belong to you to save yourself from starvin'. What if she did come a-meddlin' and a-makin' with things as was no concern o' hers, and blackenin' c'racters as would bear lookin' into better than her own, mayhap? 'Tis our dooty to forgive sech,' I says, 'and to turn 'em t'other cheek!' But Bunce, he were that hurt in his feelin's that his Bible didn't seem to do him one mossel o' good. He's unregen'rit, sir, and that's the truth. Why, to hear him

talk one would think he expected as you should take his part—him being innercent, you see, sir—against your own mother. Clean out of all reason! And as for him stoppin' on, after all that's past—why, I am bound to confess as I wouldn't ventur' for to propose it to him, sir."

While Mrs. Bunce had thus been playing the part of Antony, the hammering overhead had been going on in a subdued and spasmodic manner, which showed plainly enough that her husband had not lost a word of her discourse, and its peroration was saluted by a salvo of tremendous raps suspiciously like applause.

My uncle was really vexed. "Upon my word, Mrs. Bunce," he said, "I think you are both of you making rather too much of this. To the best of my recollection, the word 'dishonesty' was never used, and if it had been, you ought to know that it would have produced no impression upon me. It was quite unnecessary for me to 'take Bunce's part,' as you say, on a question of honesty; and if there has been any irregularity, I have been fully as much to blame for it as he. When he chose to use the language that he did to Mrs. Farquhar, I was obliged to

stop him ; but if he will now make a proper apology to her——”

“Naä !” shouted Bunce, suddenly facing about, and breaking into dialect, as his habit was when strongly moved——“Naä ! I think ’tis her owt to ’pologise to I, not me to sheä !” And, having thus delivered himself, he returned to his hammering with renewed energy.

But I thought it was high time that we should be relieved from this deafening din ; so I picked up a clod of earth and pitched it at him, calling out to him to come down, and not play the fool any longer.

Bunce obeyed my summons somewhat stiffly, a slow grin overspreading his wooden features as he descended the ladder. “How do you do, Mr. Chawls ? Glad to see you home agin, sir, and lookin’ so well, too——what I said to that there lady I sticks to,” was his greeting, uttered all in one breath.

“Bunce, Bunce, don’t force me into telling you that you must go your own way,” said my uncle. “We are too old friends to quarrel over a trifle.”

“’Tain’t no trifle as should part me and you,

Squire," returned Bunce. "If you'd ha' told me there was anythin' wrong in my book, it should ha' bin altered, even if I was out o' pocket by it, and I shouldn't ha' bore no malice; but, as the Scriptur' says, No man can serve two masters, much less a master and a mistress; and when a man o' my age finds his accounts overhauled by a stranger, and hears hisself called a cheat into the bargain—why, he naterally cuts up a bit rough. Beggin' your pardon, Squire, I think you'd ha' done the same in my place."

My uncle considered for a moment, and then answered, "I suppose I should."

I have never been able to determine satisfactorily to myself whether my uncle's keen sense of justice was or was not a quality to be envied. Its immediate and apparent results were certainly unfortunate for him, as a general thing. Assuredly Bunce did not mean to leave—would probably have apologised to Mrs. Farquhar sooner than leave, if the screw had been brought to bear upon him; and this my uncle knew perfectly well. But he would not take advantage of his power to turn the screw; and the consequence was that Bunce not only kept his place without

apologising, but—as was quite natural—cherished a grudge against my uncle for a long time afterwards. “He hadn’t no call to turn me out o’ the room afore I’d had my say,” the old fellow would repeat, with a growing sense of injury ; and I’m sorry to have to add that from that time forth the tyranny of Bunce increased fourfold.

The reader will, no doubt, conclude that my uncle was a weak man, who deserved to be bullied ; and, indeed, this was very much the view taken of his character by those who knew and loved him best. For, although, we hear a good deal about the courage of acknowledging one’s self to be in the wrong, that particular form of intrepidity has, for obvious reasons, never yet commanded popular respect, and never will. My dear old uncle did not covet popularity. He cared only to obey his conscience—and a very troublesome sort of conscience it must have been to him at times, I am afraid.

Bunce having thus dictated terms of peace, it seemed only natural to expect that Mrs. Farquhar, as representing the defeated party, would feel and express some little anger ; but that curiously equable old lady astonished me by

doing nothing of the sort. She only smiled and shook her head, and as soon as she and I were alone, confided to me that poor Bernard was quite incapable of holding his own against any one who tried to get the better of him. My warm retort that Bunce was as honest as any of us only caused her to smile more than ever. "Oh, aye," she said; "very likely. I name no names." And after that enigmatical utterance she began to talk about something else.

Mrs. Farquhar was defeated, but she was very far indeed from being put to silence; and not a day passed without many and many an allusion of the above nature falling from her. She was always cheerful, always good-humoured, and never, apparently, conscious of giving annoyance; yet she exasperated us both to the very verge of madness. Most people, I suppose, have, at one time or another of their lives, had to do with a nagging woman, and know the feeling of angry despair which is apt to be aroused by rediscussion of threshed-out topics and reiteration of arguments which have been fifty times answered. Many excellent women do nag; and perhaps the more excellent they are the more

intolerable is their system of nagging. My uncle bore it all with the patience of Job and the meekness of Moses ; but he grew more and more silent, and the harassed expression which I had noticed upon his face in former years after one of his visits to Scotland had become habitual. Even I, who had a naturally thicker skin than he, and who was, besides, exceptionally favoured by Mrs. Farquhar—even I fretted under this regimen of incessant pinpricks, until at last I could stand it no longer, and boldly attacked our venerable tormentor.

“Mrs. Farquhar,” I said to her one day, “what is the use of your going on as you do about Bunce ? He isn’t going to be sent away, you know, and you only worry uncle Bernard to death by persisting.”

She looked a good deal surprised, and said she didn’t know what I meant. She was not aware of having persisted in anything ;—except indeed in her opinion (to which, surely, she was entitled) that accounts ought to be made intelligible. “No one,” she added, “can be more anxious to spare your dear uncle worry than I am ; but when I think a thing wrong, I must say so.”

"Yes ; but might not once be enough ?" I ventured to suggest.

She stared, and then laughed, saying that I was a very impertinent young gentleman. I was certainly a very foolish one to suppose that nature and the habits of threescore years and ten could be changed by anything that I could say. Mrs. Farquhar went on as usual, and I cannot flatter myself that my remonstrance produced so much as a transient effect upon her.

But, with a hard frost which had held for ten days and showed no signs of yielding, and with the broads and dykes frozen the whole way from Thirlby to Yarmouth, I had not much leisure for brooding over domestic troubles. By great good luck, the cold had come upon us without either wind or snow ; so that the hundreds who honoured Thirlby Broad with their company daily during the continuance of this splendid skating weather had a surface like that of a vast mirror upon which to perform their evolutions. Good skaters were not quite so common in those days as they are now, while ladies who could be induced to put on skates at all were few and far between. Skating ladies, like hunting ladies, were, at that

particular period of history, apt to be looked upon a trifle askance and their tastes to be qualified as "masculine" (a term of reproach). Other times, other manners; the timid young creature who wore ringlets, who could not make out the meaning of the funny slang words which her brothers used, and who would scream and put her fingers in her ears if a gun were fired off in her presence, is as extinct as that predecessor of hers whose habit it was to faint dead away at least once in every twenty-four hours; and in the place of these we have got what we have got. I am an old fogey and a *laudator temporis acti*; but let me hasten to add that, upon the whole, I prefer the modern forms of affectation to the bygone ones. Maud Dennison, who never dreamt of taking the trouble to be affected at all, revealed herself that winter as a skater whom the whole county beheld with admiration. She did not do much in the way of figures; but she had thoroughly overcome the difficulties of the outside edge, and to see her skimming across the broads, lessening and lessening into the gray distance like a bird, was enough—as old Sir Digby Welby declared, in an unwonted access of

enthusiasm—"to make a gouty man sit down and cry with vexation."

My own education in figure-skating had not carried me beyond the power to accomplish large wavering eights and to execute an occasional hasty three, and sit down heavily at the end of it; but for speed and long distances I was as good as anybody. Nothing, therefore, could have been more natural than that my manly form should have been constantly seen hovering in close proximity to that graceful one which had so provoked Sir Digby's envy; and I daresay that when the old gentleman beheld the two of us together, he became less resigned to the drawbacks of age than ever.

Maud and I traversed miles of ice without interruption or hindrance: it was a glorious time. Before us, as we swept southwards and westwards with long, even strokes, hung the red sun, like a huge lamp behind the mists; every now and again a lonely skater would loom up ahead, come tearing past us, and be gone before I had time to do more than call out, "Hullo, George! is that you?" From afar, the voices and laughter of our more gregarious neighbours

came to us in a confused murmur, and sometimes there would be the chink, chink of a stone skimming across the ice, which, like the tinkling of the mower's scythe upon the whetstone, is one of the most delightful sounds that can strike the ear; though I am not enough of a theoretical musician to say why. The swift motion, the exhilarating freshness of the keen air, the sense of liberty combined to excite my youthful brain and to stir up in it bold imaginings and hopes, some of which occasionally struggled lamely into speech, leaving me much confused and my companion supremely unconscious. Under such circumstances as these, it was not likely that I should bother my head much about Mrs. Farquhar.

And yet Mrs. Farquhar's name was frequently upon our lips during those short—too short—winter afternoons. I was too timid, too inexperienced, perhaps almost too much in earnest, to lead the conversation often into that tender channel towards which my heart inclined me; I was not profoundly interested in the Rector's rheumatism, nor did Maud care to be told more than three or four times of the relaxations of un-

dergraduate existence. This left us with a limited range of subjects ; and so Mrs. Farquhar came in for a somewhat unduly large share of our attention. It was thus that I learnt by degrees, the history of those unhappy parochial dissensions narrated at the beginning of the present chapter. It was only by degrees that I reached the facts, for Maud was proud, and did not like either to confess or complain of her discomfiture ; but little by little the whole story came out, and I was magnanimous enough to refrain from saying, " I told you so ! " It is, of course, quite obvious to me now that Miss Dennison was a well-intentioned, but headstrong young lady, whom a snub in time was likely to save from nine future ones, and who was, therefore, rather to be congratulated than commiserated on having fallen in with an equally headstrong opponent ; but I did not see the matter at all in that light at the time. On the contrary, Maud appeared to me to be the good angel and Mrs. Farquhar the evil genius of the neighbourhood, and I am afraid I was much more angry with the latter for having enticed away the old women from church than for tormenting my uncle from morning to night.

Maud herself was evidently much mortified—less by Mrs. Farquhar's hostility than by the terrible depravity of human nature as illustrated in the conduct of those subsidised paupers. "I shall never be able to feel any interest in them again," she said. "I keep on telling myself that they are no worse than I am, and that, if I were poor and hungry, I should very likely sell my birthright for a mess of pottage; but it won't do. I know quite well that there are depths of meanness to which I could never descend. I might buy the pottage, and eat it; but I should not pretend that I was swallowing it down to satisfy a spiritual craving. Sometimes I feel as if I almost hated the poor! Those old women make believe to be as fond of me as ever, and declare that they would never have left the church if that greasy Ebenezer man hadn't convinced them that there could be no earnest religion in an established form of liturgy; and I can't stoop to tell them that I know all about it, and that they have simply sold themselves to Mrs. Farquhar, who has bought them, not because she cares a straw whether they go to church or chapel, but because, for some reason or other, she wants

to spite me. My father understands them better than I do, and they like him a great deal better than they do me. He goes on visiting them just as if nothing had happened, and thinks it very natural that they should take a tempting bribe, and then tell lies about it. I don't think it natural at all. I can't help despising them, and they see that I despise them, and so all my influence is slipping away. If it were a mere question of fighting Mrs. Farquhar, I might set to work, and at the end of a twelvemonth I dare say I should have a very good chance of beating her—that is, unless she is very rich. But I don't choose to fight Mrs. Farquhar."

It was not all at once that Maud spoke to me with this openness. At first she was reticent, and only hinted at disappointments and annoyances, without entering into particulars as to their nature; but when she found how deep and unquestioning was my sympathy (for in truth I should have sympathised with her just as much if she and her adversary had changed places) her reserve broke down, and she not only confided to me all that has been related here, but told me of various other trivial slights which Mrs.

Farquhar had taken pains to inflict upon her, and which were all the more galling by reason of their triviality. She laughed when I expressed a desire to throttle that mischief-making old woman with my own hands, and said I was talking nonsense ; still, doubtless, it was a relief to her to find some one who was ready to adopt her own views in a spirit of blind faith, and who did not hesitate to emphasise them in language more forcible than she could permit herself to make use of.

The happy result of it all was that her demeanour towards me underwent a marked change. She ceased to patronise me ; she ceased to remind me that I was still an infant in the eyes of the law ; she acknowledged that to me, as well as to herself, Mrs. Farquhar was an affliction ; and so a common trouble rivetted the bond of union between us. But, after all, we were both young, and trouble sat lightly upon us. It was impossible to be in low spirits while flying across those long reaches of smooth ice upon the wings of the wind ; and, indeed, I am half inclined to doubt whether it is possible for young and healthy people to be really in low spirits at all. Be that as it may, Maud and I thoroughly enjoyed

ourselves, in spite of Mrs. Farquhar, whom we sometimes saw far away, wrapped up in furs and conversing in a lively manner with the other dowagers, and who took no notice of us or our proceedings. And then, just before the final thaw came, we had a little adventure.

For two days there had been unmistakable signs of an approaching change. On each afternoon the thermometer had risen a little above freezing point to fall below it again after sunset; now the ice had become soft and slushy; the wind after shifting about to all points of the compass, had begun to blow gently but steadily from the south-west, and even the most obstinate optimists had to admit that a genuine thaw had set in. Still, there was supposed to be a sufficient thickness of ice to render skating safe, if not precisely enjoyable.

"It will be our last day," sighed Maud, as she rose from the chair upon which she had been sitting while I adjusted her skates; and we determined to make the most of it.

Accordingly, we set off on a somewhat longer trip than usual, meaning to cross our own broad, push on by way of the dykes to Hickling Broad and Horsey Mere, and so return through another

series of dykes. I, for my part, spent a very pleasant afternoon, in spite of the raw, damp air and of the ice—which last was in about as bad a condition as it well could have been. Uncomfortable as it was to skate through large puddles and over a soft surface more like snow than ice, it did not occur to me that there was anything dangerous in such a proceeding until we reached Horsey Mere, when that aspect of the case was brought under my notice in an abrupt and striking manner. All of a sudden, and without the smallest preliminary warning of any kind, there came a great crash, and I found myself plunged under water. My first impulse, after I rose gasping to the surface, and struck out instinctively, was to shout, “It’s all right!” in order to reassure my companion, but what was my horror on discovering that she had disappeared! As may be imagined I was tolerably cold already, but I shall not easily forget the chill that went to my heart when I realised what had happened, nor how, in the mere instant that elapsed before I had got hold of her, I had time to picture to myself all the consequences, immediate and remote, of Maud’s death and the terrible future

that awaited me should I survive her. It was only an instant. As soon as I had got her to place her hands on my shoulders, so as to leave my arms free, I knew I should save her, though, truth to tell, the task did not seem a very easy one. Swimming in my clothes was a thing I was well accustomed to, having been swamped many a time at Eton ; but I had never before been called upon to swim in a heavy great-coat, with skates upon my feet, and with a fellow-creature weighing me down ; nor did I exactly see how we were to reach the shore, which was only a few yards distant. To scramble up on the ice again was, as I knew, an impossibility, and I was not a little afraid of being sucked under. However, there was nothing for it but to make for the edge of the pool in which we were immersed, and this I did, throwing my whole weight upon the surface. It yielded, as I expected ; we both went down, and rose again with some loss of breath, and, after repeating this manœuvre two or three times, I had the satisfaction of grasping dry land. We scrambled on shore somehow or other, and sat looking at one another, thoroughly exhausted and half dead with cold.

I dare say we presented a sufficiently ridiculous appearance in our forlorn and dragged state, and I know that we both laughed a little between our chattering teeth. Maud had behaved splendidly throughout. She had never lost her presence of mind for a moment—she had done exactly as she was told, and she had not uttered a word or a cry. She did not say much even now. Only, after I had risen to my feet and had assisted her to do the same, she touched me gently on the arm to make me look at her, and said, “Thank you, Charley.”

It does not sound a superlatively grateful speech to make to a man who has just saved you from drowning ; but it more than satisfied me. For while Maud was uttering these three short words, my eyes met hers, and I saw there—how shall I express it?—I saw something which could not be translated into words—which could not even, at the moment, be expressed in thought ; but which sent a thrill of exultation through the whole of my shivering person. Such flashes of happiness come, every now and again, into a man’s life ; though never, I think, after a certain age. As we grow older we become less impres-

sionable, more analytical, less open to vague suggestions of bliss. Had all this happened five or six years later, I should probably have asked myself what was the meaning of that look of Maud's, and whether in truth it signified, as it seemed to do, that my dearest hopes were to be realised ; but, as it was, I put no such direct inquiries to my soul. I walked along beside her in silence, a little bit dazed and supremely happy, without quite knowing why.

There was a labourer's cottage some three hundred yards away from the mere. Thither we betook ourselves, and having been restored with hot drinks and furnished with such garments as the good woman of the house could provide us with in exchange for our dripping ones, we set off to trudge homewards in the guise of a pair of East-Anglian peasants. By this time Maud had recovered the full use of her tongue, and she now thanked me more warmly and at greater length for having preserved her from a watery grave, saying a great many kind and flattering things, which it would have been delightful to listen to had I not been troubled by a most unfortunate recollection which had occurred to me

while waiting in the cottage, and which sadly dimmed the glory of my heroism.

"Maud," I said at last, speaking in a doleful voice, and feeling as if all my bright visions were about to vanish, like Cinderella's coach and horses, "I must tell you something. I didn't really save your life at all."

"My dear Charley," she answered, "if there is anything certain in this world, it is certain that I should be lying dead at the bottom of Horsey Mere at this moment but for you."

"I give you my word," I exclaimed eagerly, "that I firmly believed so until a few minutes ago ; but then I remembered what I should have thought of before, if I had had my wits about me. Do you know that we were struggling for our lives in—in—*four feet of water* !"

Well, she declared that that made no difference at all ; that she was just as much indebted to me as if the peril had been a real instead of an imaginary one, and so forth ; but naturally she could not help laughing a little ; and I had to laugh too, though it went rather against the grain. It was a cruel practical joke for Fortune to play upon a poor hero.



CHAPTER VII.

THE RECTOR HAS FRIENDS TO DINNER.

THERE is a French *chanson*, *Comme à Vingt Ans*, which everybody knows:—*Comme on aime à vingt ans!*—*Comme on rit!*—*Comme on pleure!* and all the rest. I heard it sung for the first time when I was but a little more than twenty myself; I heard it sung for about the hundred and fiftieth time at a concert only the other day by a fat old Frenchman, who waxed so pathetic over it that he made himself cry, and very nearly made me cry into the bargain. Doubtless he was thinking of those days long, long ago, when he was slim and handsome and twenty; I wonder whether he noticed another fat old man in the audience, who was listening to him with a lackadaisical air, and whose eyes expressed the profoundest sympathy. Ah me! I too have been in Arcadia; I too have memories of the

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golden age. It is ridiculous ; it is not without an effort that I myself can realise the fact that I was once young ; nevertheless, a fact it is.

I don't know that the generality of us grow much better or wiser with the progress of time. Experience, of course, we gain—a dreary acquisition after all. It is impossible for a man to grow old and not learn a great many things which it was equally impossible for him to know when he was young ; but, unfortunately, when the ignorance goes the bliss is very apt to go too. We are behind the scenes now ; we know all about it ; we plod slowly forwards on the journey of life, surveying the landscape through our spectacles with dispassionate eyes ; the colour on the distant mountains no longer deceives us ; “beyond their utmost purple rim ” lies no paradise, as we are very well aware ; if rocks or thorny hedges bar our path we don't make a prodigious outcry, having crossed many such places already, and having learnt that the bruises and wounds inflicted by them are soon healed and forgotten. *Tout passe, tout lasse* : one jogs on more easily than of yore, but certainly less enjoyably. I don't say that I wish to begin my life over again

—very few people, I should imagine, would wish for that ; but I do wish that the happiest days of it should not be utterly lost and abolished for ever. Indeed, I can't believe that they are really dead and gone—those good days. All my life long I have had a conviction that they were only laid aside until the hurry and labour of this short existence should be at an end, and that I should go back to them, or that they would come back to me, at last in a world where pain and sin shall be done away with. I don't in the least see how such a thing is to be contrived ; but that has never yet been held to be an argument against any creed ; and in an age when every one is permitted to form bold speculations as to the meaning and end of existence, nobody, surely, will quarrel with me for tacking my humble little surmise on to the skirts of an orthodox faith in immortality.

I have been trying, since my return to England, after an absence of many years, to understand the theories of the various philosophers—Positivist, Materialist, Agnostic, and other—who have sprung into notice during my exile, and whose gospels, I am assured, are slowly but

steadily undermining that which was taught us by our predecessors. So far, I cannot say that I have gained much light from these new guides; although I have been favoured with the help of an intellectual friend whom I sometimes meet at the Club, who explains the hard passages for me, and who is very anxious that I should adore his own particular fetish, which I understand to be Humanity with a big H. I have not found myself able to embrace this funny faith; I don't see my way to the deification of my fellow-creatures or to the worshipping of myself under a collective aspect; nor can I be contented with the wretched little shred of unconscious future existence so complacently offered to me. Bunce's "singing in heavenly quires" may not be altogether satisfactory; but it seems preferable to painless extinction. My Positivist friend says this is nonsense; he tells me that I am selfish and gross; he almost doubts whether I am capable of rising to the level of his sublime conceptions; and perhaps he is right. It is true that I don't want to rise to them; I never was ambitious.

The whole of the above digression (for which I beg to apologise) has been provoked by my

reminiscences of what I was at twenty years of age, and of the remarkable simplicity which distinguished my character at that remote period. After what I said in the last chapter about the look which I surprised in Maud's eyes while we stood dripping by the margin of Horsey Mere, it might be supposed that I should have confronted the future with confidence, and looked upon my fortune (in an amatory sense) as already three parts made; but no such thing! She had only to treat me with a little reserve and coolness—which she did for some days afterwards—to nip all my half-formed hopes in the bud, and cast me down into an abyss of despair. My impression was that she repented of having said as much as she had done, now that she knew my aquatic feat to have been wholly uncalled for; and this seemed rather hard, because, after all, four feet of water will amply suffice to drown an exhausted girl.

Much annoyance was caused me by the celerity with which the news of our adventure was bruited about, and by the exaggerated reports of it which found credence in various quarters. Before a week was out I was sick of telling people that I had not swum a distance of twenty yards under

water, dragging Miss Dennison in my wake, and knocking a hole in the ice with my head to crawl out through at the end of it. Also the sprightly comments and innuendoes of the ladies who came to call and hear all about the catastrophe were extremely distasteful to me. Even Bunce was quite arch and knowing on the subject, so that I was obliged to rebuke him for saying the things that he did—and in Maud's presence, too, which was most embarrassing. As for the Rector, he came tearing up in a state of enthusiastic gratitude, which, I am sorry to say, evaporated in shouts of laughter when he heard my version of the story. George Warren, who was there at the time, laughed uproariously, too, and joined in the chaff to which I had to submit for the next hour.

I told George afterwards that I considered this rather a poor class of wit, and he begged my pardon, promising not to offend in the same way again ; so I forgave him. But what surprised and angered me most of all was the extraordinary view which Mrs. Farquhar chose to take of the matter.

“ Aye, aye,” she said, nodding her head, with an infuriating smile ; “ a clever young lady,

indeed!—and no doubt she would know the depth of the water very well before she fell in. There was the chance of her catching her death of cold ; but she would just make up her mind to risk that. I'm not denying her courage."

And when I indignantly inquired whether Mrs. Farquhar meant to insinuate that Miss Dennison had tumbled into Horsey Mere on purpose, the old lady only pursed up her lips and went on nodding, till I had to leave the room hastily in order to keep myself from throwing something at her.

"What on earth is she driving at?" I asked impatiently of my uncle, while we were sitting together over the fire after dinner. "Does she suppose that Maud deliberately jumped into a frozen lake on a bitter January afternoon to serve some mysterious ends of her own?"

"Well, yes," answered my uncle ; "I believe that is what she supposes. You know—or, on second thoughts, perhaps you don't know—that women are apt to look upon most of the incidents of life as bearing more or less directly upon the all-important subject of marriage. My mother has taken it into her head that you will be a

matrimonial catch, and that Miss Dennison is determined to catch you. Of course both these assumptions are mistaken ; but I have not been able to convince her that they are so, and perhaps it is hardly worth while to try any more. It won't injure either of you to let her talk."

"Good heavens!" I ejaculated, greatly perturbed, "I never heard of such a thing! I wouldn't have this come to Maud's ears for any money. Do you mean to say that you didn't contradict Mrs. Farquhar?"

"Oh, I contradicted her—and then she contradicted me, you know. I pointed out to her that you were not a rich man, nor even (saving your presence) a man at all as yet, and I added that, to the best of my belief, Miss Maud was perfectly innocent of any designs upon you; but in the long run it occurred to me that I might as well have held my tongue. So, after that, I did hold my tongue."

"If only she would do the same!" I sighed despondently. "But that she will never do; and it is easy to see how all this will end. Some of these days the Rector will begin to think that he has submitted to enough insults, and there

will be a quarrel between us and our oldest friends. Then, I suppose, that—dear old lady will be satisfied.”

“I don’t think the Rector will quarrel with us,” answered my uncle quietly.

The Rector, I must say, was very magnanimous. If he was hurt by Mrs. Farquhar’s active and unwarrantable hostility to him in his parish—and, as he was naturally a sensitive man, I have very little doubt but that he was hurt—he allowed none of us to see it. Perhaps he knew that his strength was to sit still, and that the capricious old lady would soon tire of Ebenezer Chapel when she found that no one tried to entice her away from it; perhaps he may have thought it beneath his dignity to dispute on theological matters with unauthorised and ignorant persons. Still, it was not the less magnanimous on his part to refrain from uttering a word of complaint, and to come up to the Hall nearly every day, without abating anything of his customary cordiality. Mrs. Farquhar used to say of him that he was a well-meaning man, but that she greatly feared he was only a nominal Christian.

The date of my return to Oxford was fast approaching when an invitation came asking the three of us to dine quietly at the Rectory. I had some hope that, circumstances being what they were, Mrs. Farquhar would decline this proffered hospitality for herself; but she disappointed me by merely pursuing her ordinary rule of conduct with regard to invitations. That is to say, that she began by declaring that she was much too old to go out anywhere after dark, proceeded to observe that it did not do to consult one's own convenience alone, and finally sat down to write an acceptance with an air of pious resignation. The truth, I suppose, was that she liked a little society, as was very natural; but I don't to this day understand why she should not have acknowledged as much.

The Rectory was a good-sized, solid, comfortable house, where the Rector, who appreciated comfort of a solid kind, had for many years been in the habit of giving very successful little dinners. The cooking of these dinners was plain, but excellent, the wine was of the best; and when his guests had done justice to both, it was their worthy host's custom to lead them, either

into the garden to admire his roses, of which he was justly proud, or into a spacious study, where easy chairs and a blazing fire awaited them—according as the seasons were. Nobody was ever asked to enter the drawing-room, which had the forlorn aspect common to the drawing-rooms of all houses in which there are no ladies; the Rector's reception-room was his study. In it was the well-selected library which he so seldom found time to consult; in it was the enormous stuffed pike caught in Thirlby Broad, whose weight I have forgotten and will not attempt to recall, for fear of being accused of exaggeration; in it, modestly shrinking into a corner between one of the bookcases and the wall, was a small bureau, through the glass doors of which could be distinguished guns, fishing-rods, landing-nets, and eel-spears; in it distressed parishioners were wont to receive daily aid, spiritual and temporal; and in it the Rector dearly loved to collect a little knot of cronies on winter evenings, and to start them on an interminable chat over field sports. He did not hunt—indeed, it was not much of a hunting country—but in every other branch of venery, from the

breaking-in of a puppy to the training of a hawk (which latter art he had practised with signal success when a young man) he was an authority to whom the neighbours far and wide deferred.

All this was before Maud's time. Her advent had naturally brought about a change both in the appearance of the house and in the habits of those who frequented it, and her skill had effected a transformation in the Rectory drawing-room which Mrs. Farquhar either had not been able or had not cared to accomplish for ours. In those days the national taste with regard to domestic decoration had not been raised to its present exalted level; nevertheless, it was into an extremely pretty room that I followed my uncle and Mrs. Farquhar on the evening above alluded to. I don't suppose much additional money had been laid out upon it. The carpet, the sofas, and the chairs were the old familiar ones, which had probably been purchased by the late Mrs. Dennison before Maud's birth; but some people have a wonderful knack of rearrangement, and can achieve the most astonishing results with the simplest of materials to work upon. I did not then scrutinise details as one

learns to do with advancing years ; all I saw was that, by some magic or other, a wilderness had been turned into a garden. There were flowers everywhere ; a bank of them could be seen in the dim conservatory upon which one of the windows opened. The faint scent of them filled the air. The light did not come from glaring lamps placed on a level with one's eyes, like ours at home, but fell softly from wax candles in the old sconces on the wall. Maud, in a pale blue dress, the fashion of which I will not particularise, lest to the reader's unaccustomed eyes it should seem less charming than it really was, rose from the piano as we made our entrance ; the Rector beamed upon us from the hearthrug, and advanced holding out both hands.

“ Well, Le Marchant, this is a treat ! How long is it since you last dined in my house ? You don't remember, eh ? Nor do I ; but I know it's a good many years. Can't say you haven't been asked though. Yes, yes, my dear fellow, I quite understand. Turning out at night is a nuisance, and one grows lazy as one grows old ; isn't that so, Mrs. Farquhar ? We are all apt to grow lazy, all except you. You set us a grand example in

that respect. To tell you the truth, I should be inclined to renounce going to dinner-parties myself, if it were not for Maud. It wouldn't be fair to shut her out of all society. No party to-night, you know—only ourselves. I asked young Warren to join us, but he says he can't spare an evening, reading hard for his degree. Good fellow that—capital fellow! Charley, my friend, go and do likewise. You imitate George Warren, and we'll imitate Mrs. Farquhar, and then it'll be all right, won't it?"

The good Rector's voluble welcome had a touch of nervousness in it. Very likely he, as well as I, may have counted upon Mrs. Farquhar's refusal of the invitation sent to her, and he may have felt some anxiety as to the spirit in which she would meet his advances. She, while he was speaking, had been letting her eyes roam round the room and its adornments. Obviously she was saying to herself, "Roses in January!—and in the parish clergyman's house too! This is not as it should be—this shows sinful waste and extravagance. How many starving families might have been relieved with the money that has been lavished on rearing these useless

flowers !” But she did not express her thoughts aloud. No one could be more agreeable than Mrs. Farquhar when it pleased her to be so ; and such was her pleasure now. She made a brisk, sprightly little speech to the Rector in acknowledgment of his compliment to her activity ; she took Maud’s hand, and patted it quite affectionately, whispering, “ My dear, what a lovely dress !”—and so, by-and-by, we all went in to dinner upon terms of peace and harmony.

I really believe that Mrs. Farquhar intended to be pleasant and to keep the peace that evening. I think she was indistinctly conscious that there were people who disliked contradiction, that my uncle was one of them, and that the Rector possibly was another ; and although this might strike her as a weak and somewhat contemptible trait in a person’s character, I am inclined to give her credit for a kindly willingness to make allowances for it. I know that she was putting some sort of restraint upon herself, because I saw her more than once gasp and shut up her lips tightly, instead of uttering the observation which was evidently upon the tip of her tongue.

But it was impossible that she should go on in this way very long. Her notion of conversation was discussion ; and when warmth and good cheer had produced the effect upon her which they produce upon all of us, she naturally felt a wish to converse. Then she began to discuss ; and my uncle, who had been unusually cheerful and chatty up to that moment, subsided into silence. The rest of us, I think, behaved pretty well. We all knew by this time that there was no sort of use in arguing with Mrs. Farquhar, and we endeavoured, by a prompt and pusillanimous surrender of our opinions and a hasty skipping from subject to subject, to stave off the encounter for which her soul was thirsting. The worst of this system of dialogue is that it becomes bewildering after the first ten minutes or so, and is apt to lead one into introducing a dangerous topic from sheer inadvertence and lack of something to say. Thus it was that the Rector, putting his helm hard a-port to avoid the Scylla of politics, steered full into the Charybdis of cricket on Sunday afternoons (an innovation which had been introduced during the summer into an adjoining parish), and had declared this

to be an excellent idea before he could stop himself.

Mrs. Farquhar threw up her hands in consternation. "Mr. Dennison," she exclaimed, "you take my breath away!"

But this was only a figure of speech; her breath served her very well for the delivery of a spirited harangue, in which the sin of desecrating the Sabbath, and the consequences entailed thereby, were set forth in the plainest terms.

"Well, well," observed the Rector, when she had done, "I know you don't take quite the same view of the matter in Scotland that we do."

"Mr. Dennison," said the old lady, impressively, "do you, or do you not read the Fourth Commandment to the people every Sabbath-day in church?"

"Why, of course I do," answered the Rector, turning at bay; "but the Fourth Commandment enjoins abstinence from work, not from play; and besides, the Sabbath is a Jewish institution, wholly distinct from our Sunday."

Mrs. Farquhar rejoined that, if we were to begin explaining away the Commandments in that fashion, it was not easy to see where we

were to stop. Did Mr. Dennison consider himself at liberty to put his own interpretation upon all the precepts laid down in the Bible? And so the controversy went on for a quarter of an hour. Everybody has heard so often all that there is to be said upon this subject, and everybody is so heartily sick of it, that the details of this particular dispute need not be recorded.

Of course the Rector got the worst of it. He ended by urging feebly that it was better for young men to be playing a healthy game of cricket than fuddling themselves in the village public-house.

"They should be doing neither the one nor the other," cried Mrs. Farquhar; "they should be in church listening to the Word."

"But they won't go to church in the afternoon."

"And whose fault is that? Why is it that the Scots are the most sober and God-fearing people in the world?"

"Are the Scotch a sober people?"

"They are. And why? Because the ministers do their duty; because a man who profaned the Sabbath by playing cricket upon it anywhere

north of the Tweed would be—eh ! I think he would be just stoned. To say that they will not go to church is nonsense. They should be made to go. Show me a godless parish, and I will show you a godless minister.”

“ My dear mother ! ” remonstrated my uncle.

“ I’m speaking generally, Bernard. Mr. Dennison will understand that, I’m sure.”

The Rector kept his temper. “ Admitting, for the sake of argument ”—he began.

“ Oh,” interrupted Mrs. Farquhar, with a shake of her head and a smile, “ I would be sorry to admit anything for the sake of argument. I think that would be a very poor reason for making admissions.”

My uncle had a little laugh at this ; and the Rector continued, with some slight impatience, “ Admitting that the Church of England clergy are an inefficient body, the problem remains the same. Here you have a number of young men who won’t consent to spend the greater part of their one weekly holiday in church ; how are you to keep them from spending it in the alehouse ? ”

“ Not by leading them out of one sin into another,” answered Mrs. Farquhar, decisively.

"The minister's duty is to uphold his testimony. If they will not hear him, he is not to blame; and he has no authority to interfere with a sinner's liberty of choice. Let him uphold his testimony! I do not think, Mr. Dennison," she added quietly, "that you have given that plan a trial as yet."

"Are you not a little bit illogical, mother?" struck in my uncle, perceiving that the speaker was no longer dealing with generalities, and deeming it time to effect a diversion. "You said just now that the sinners ought to be coerced."

"Nay, my dear Bernard," answered Mrs. Farquhar, in accents of gentle reproof, "I think it is you who are illogical."

Heaven only knows what she meant; but such retorts were common with her, and were most effective. What rejoinder could be made to a woman who turned upon you with so exasperatingly senseless a speech as that? My uncle and the Rector exchanged expressive glances, and said no more. Mrs. Farquhar looked smilingly round the table, as if to challenge further opposition, and, obtaining no response, enjoyed her legitimate triumph.

We did not sit long over our wine after the ladies left us; nor was our intercourse of that free and cheerful kind which should have been a natural result of the occasion. I think that my uncle wanted to apologise for Mrs. Farquhar's rudeness, and that the Rector wished to say it was a matter of no importance at all; but it was not exactly easy for either of them to put his thoughts into words; and so the Rector's Madeira hardly received its just meed of attention.

When we entered the drawing-room, I left the old people to themselves, for it seemed to me that too much time had been frittered away in listening to their disputes—and made straight for the corner where Maud was sitting, with a look of patient resignation upon her face.

"Come into the conservatory," I said boldly; "I want to see that new flower." I made this demand upon the sound old principle that it is always well to ask for more than you expect to get. There is something in the very name of a conservatory which suggests flirtation, and I thought that an immediate move thither was just the sort of thing that would be certain to strike Maud as ridiculous. So that it was some-

thing of a surprise to me to see her rise at once and step out through the open window, without a word.

I followed her into the dusk and fragrance beyond, not without a momentary uncomfortable consciousness of the smile which was probably stealing over the features of the three mature observers behind my back, and she passed on till she reached the glass door which opened on to the lawn. Here she took up her station, resting her elbows upon the back of a wooden chair, and gazing out at the pale moonlight of a misty winter night. The situation was a delightful and thrilling one, and if I could only have found language in which to clothe the thoughts that were struggling for utterance within me, I should certainly have astonished my companion very much. But I was young and inexperienced, and didn't know how to begin ; so I held my peace.

By-and-by she turned round, as if she had only just remembered my presence, and asked :
“ Was it the auriculas that you wanted to see ? ”

“ No,” I answered ; “ it wasn't the auriculas.”

“ Nor the hydrangeas ? ”

“ No.”

“Nor the unique pelargonium, which we wouldn’t sell for its weight in gold?”

“Well, no ; I think not.”

“Ah,” she said gravely, “that is just as well ; because none of these flowers happen to be in bloom, as you might have known. If it is not an impertinent question, what *did* you want to see?”

“I wanted to see the most beautiful flower that the Rectory ever possessed, or ever will possess,” I replied audaciously. “I wanted to see you.”

“Oh,” said Maud, who did not appear to be either flattered or fluttered by this direct and original compliment. “I think,” she added consideringly, after a minute or two—“I think if I were you, Charley, I wouldn’t try to say pretty things. At least I would put off all attempts of the kind for several years. Thank you very much all the same ; I know you meant it well ; but between ourselves—it did sound rather idiotic.”

“And if I were you,” I retorted warmly, “I wouldn’t try to say sharp things. You only succeed in being ill-natured.”

She drew herself up, and looked decidedly offended—which was a salve to my wounded feelings. “I do not like to be called ill-natured,” she said.

“Neither do I like to be called idiotic,” I remarked.

“But I did not call you so. I said you had made a speech which sounded idiotic; and so it did. Besides, I only told you as a friend, and for your own good. If I had not, you might have gone and said the same thing to somebody else, who would have laughed at you in her sleeve, without making any kind allowances, as I do.”

“I should never have said the same thing to any one else in the world,” I declared.

“Perhaps, after all, somebody else would have been pleased. Some day or other somebody else is sure to be pleased when you say idiotic things to her; only you ought to have more sense of appropriateness. No sane person would ever think of telling his sister that she was like a flower; and I want you to look upon me as a sort of sister—an elder sister.”

“Now, I do wonder,” I exclaimed, “whether

you speak like that just in order to enrage me, or whether you really mean it!"

"Why should it enrage you?" asked Maud, with an air of the most innocent surprise. "Would you not like to have a sister?—or is it that you still object to my calling myself older than you? I can't help that, if you will persist in having such boyish ways. Only boys get angry at being told they are young."

This was too much! If in truth she regarded me in the light of a boy and a brother, what had she meant by looking at me as she had done after I pulled her out of the water? I turned away in deep dudgeon. "Had we not better go back to the drawing-room?" I asked, with dignity.

But she burst out laughing. "How easy it is to send you off into a huff!" she exclaimed. "Please forgive me for this once, and I will try not to give offence again. No; we won't go back to the drawing-room yet, unless you are in a particular hurry. Do you know why I came out here?"

"Not to please me, evidently," I answered.

"No, not to please you; only to get you out

of the way. I knew they wanted to talk about you, those three, and I suppose they are talking about you at this moment?"

"How do you know they are talking about me?" I asked.

"My father let it out—you know how he lets everything out. It seems that Mrs. Farquhar has been consulting him lately upon the subject of the great mystery, and what ought to be done about it. As far as I can make out, he and she don't agree; but then they both disagree with your uncle; and so you were invited to dinner to-night in order that they might make a combined attack upon him."

"I don't know what this precious mystery may be, and I don't care," I said; "but if it concerns my uncle and me, I wish they would let us settle it between us. We have got on pretty well hitherto without help."

"Yes; but Mr. Le Marchant is a person who listens to advice."

"He hardly ever takes it though," I cried, eager to clear my uncle from an imputation which it appeared to me had been uttered with a spice of contempt.

Maud made no rejoinder. She had shifted her attitude a little, and was now leaning against the woodwork which supported the tiers of flower-pots, with her elbow resting upon one of the steps and her hand under her chin. The pale moonlight fell upon her face, which wore a serious look. "How I should have hated to live in the days when there were no railways or telegraphs, and no post to speak of!" she exclaimed at last, quite irrelevantly.

I said the world under those conditions would not have suited me very well either, and asked what had put the thought of that benighted era into her head.

"I was only thinking," she answered, "that it is not quite so bad to part with one's friends nowadays as it would have been then. Of course, you will change a great deal, that can't be helped. Still, I suppose you will come down to the old place from time to time, and see us all jogging on in the old way till some of us jog off altogether. You won't lose sight of us, and forget all about us? Fifty years ago a young man went out into the world, and there was an end of him. When he came back his friends

had to make acquaintance with him all over again, and there must have been a good deal of mutual disappointment."

"I don't know exactly what you mean by going out into the world," I said. "I am not going to do that, that I know of."

"Oh," she said quietly, "I think you will go. I think you may make up your mind to that."

"Of course," I agreed, "I shall go into some profession, but it won't take me any farther away than London most likely, and I shall be down here so often that perhaps you may not be disappointed in me. The process of deterioration will be so gradual that I hope you won't notice it."

"Yes; that is a cheering thought," replied Maud, gravely. "Also it is just possible that you may not deteriorate. But it does not do to count upon the future." She added abruptly, turning her eyes full upon me, "I hope you don't count upon things too much."

I was greatly taken aback, and my heart died within me, for it seemed to me that her words could have but one meaning. I stammered

out some incoherent reply, and she continued earnestly——

“Don’t count upon anything until it is yours; that is so much the best way. All kinds of things may happen. General Le Marchant may marry, and have children, for instance; which would make it rather difficult for your uncle to leave Thirlby away from him. And after all, I suppose there is some truth in what people say, that it is a much finer thing to earn one’s fortune than to inherit it.”

“Oh, Thirlby!” I said, greatly relieved. “If that is all, there was no need to caution me against over-confidence. I know well enough that I have no claim upon the property, and I have never looked forward to inheriting it. The fact is, that I couldn’t look forward to anything that involved the dear old man’s death. You don’t understand, of course——”

“Oh yes; I do,” she interrupted.

“Well, you don’t know him as I do, and it would be impossible for you to understand how I feel towards him. He has been a great deal more than a father to me; he has been all and everything until——until lately.”

“Until Mrs. Farquhar came, you mean?”

That was not exactly what I had meant, but I had not the courage to be more explicit; and Maud went on:

“I was wrong about Mrs. Farquhar and you were right, I admit. I would give anything now to get her out of the place; but she won’t go, and probably I shall suffer from her more than you will, if that is any comfort to you. I am very glad to hear that you do not take it for granted that you will be Squire of Thirlby one day. Perhaps you will be; but I fancy that there is a doubt about it, and it is best to be prepared for disappointments. Now tell me, what are you going to be?—soldier, sailor, tinker, or tailor?”

This question led us into a protracted and very interesting conversation, during which I quite recovered my temper and spirits, and which ended by my companion’s presenting me with a flower to keep me in countenance, as she said, on my reappearance before the company, and to give me a plausible air of having been engaged in botanical research.

The company, however, when we returned to

it, asked no questions, and was apparently not disposed to be censorious. The company wore a slightly flushed and jaded aspect, as after a long disputation. Two-thirds of it were still eager and aggressive, while the minority showed signs of exhaustion; albeit a meek determination to hold his own was legible upon his countenance. Evidently the combined attack had taken place; and it also seemed that the allies had fallen out during the progress of operations, as allies will do; for, when we stepped into the room, Mrs. Farquhar, whose back was towards us, was saying, in a high empathic voice, "Well, Mr. Dennison, I must differ from you altogether, and it is my opinion that you are advising Bernard wrongly as well as foolishly."

"My dear madam," the Rector was beginning with some warmth, "I might apply those very same terms to yourself, only that I dislike to be rude——" But here he caught sight of us, and pulled himself up with—"Well, well, there's enough said. What is the night like, Charley? More rain coming, do you think?"

"It is twenty minutes to eleven," my uncle observed, getting up and looking at his watch.

“The carriage must have been at the door for the last half-hour at least. John will be seriously displeased if he and the horses are kept waiting much longer, and when John is displeased both he and his horses are generally taken ill, and are unfit for service for periods varying from a fortnight to three weeks.”

The Rector begged us not to think of moving yet awhile—in those days, and in that part of the country, one’s entertainers always made a point of protesting against one’s departure. I don’t know whether they do it still. But we put on our coats and wraps in spite of these friendly entreaties, and we were soon rumbling away in the heavy old green coach which had belonged to my uncle’s father and very likely to his grandfather too.

The first part of our short drive was accomplished in silence; but although the darkness prevented me from distinguishing the features of my opposite neighbours, I felt instinctively that Mrs. Farquhar was in a state of ferment; and before we were half way across the park, she burst out with: “A wilful man must have his way, and the consequences will be upon

his own head ; but I would just like to warn Charley——”

“Excuse me, mother,” interrupted my uncle ; but I would rather not re-open the subject just now.”

“I’m not re-opening the subject, Bernard ; only I think that there should be an end of secrecy. The truth must be told some day, and better now than later.”

“We will say no more about it for the present, if you please,” answered my uncle.

His voice had an authoritative inflection which was very unusual with him.

Mrs. Farquhar, I suppose, was overawed ; for she said no more, and, as soon as we reached the house, went upstairs, after bidding us good-night quite meekly.

I was about to follow her example ; but my uncle took me by the arm. “Come into the library, Charley,” said he ; “we have got to go through a disagreeable half-hour, you and I. As my mother says—better now than later.”

I glanced curiously at his face, which was pale and very grave, and I noticed that there was a drawn look about the corners of his mouth,

as though he were in pain. "My dear old man," I said, "don't tell me anything, if you would rather not."

He looked back at me smiling. "I fear we can't shirk it any longer," he answered. "If I don't tell you, somebody else will; and after all, these things generally hurt more in the anticipation than in the reality. I shall be glad to have spoken, when it is over and done with."

So I gave the arm which he had passed through mine a squeeze, and in that fashion we entered the library, where the fire was burning brightly, and my uncle's arm-chair and slippers were waiting for him.





CHAPTER VIII.

I AM INTRODUCED TO THE FAMILY SKELETON.

It is the commonest thing in the world to hear people say that they would rather bear any pain themselves than see those whom they love bear it: such things are easily said. For my own part, certain reminiscences preclude me from making assertions of that kind; but, in common with the majority of mortals, I hate to witness suffering, and I think I hate even more to witness humiliation. Now, knowing every line of my Uncle Bernard's face as I did, and every trick of feature and attitude belonging to him, I could see plainly enough, when he seated himself in his accustomed place by the fireside, that the communication which he had to make to me was one of shame as well as of sorrow; and I, therefore, devoutly hoped that he would blurt it out in a few words, and be done with it.

But he was not a man who cared to spare himself, nor was it his habit to speak without deliberation. He sat looking silently at the fire for some minutes before he began, in the calm measured tone which he always assumed when he was at all moved: "I have a long story to tell you, Charley." And then, after another pause: "I don't know whether it has ever crossed your mind to suspect that I might have a son living; but such is the case."

This, then, was the great secret! Certainly I might have guessed it before, and the conversation which I had overheard during our drive back from Yarmouth should have enlightened me as to its nature; but, somehow or other, my conjectures had never brought me within sight of this solution, and its sudden announcement caused me a sharp pang. I can honestly say that my abrupt deposition from the rank of an Isaac to that of an Ishmael disturbed me very little; but I was mortified by the thought that my uncle, who, as I had supposed, told me everything, had concealed a matter of such importance from me all my life, and the only word that I could get out by way of comment was a stupid "Oh!"

“ Yes,” continued my uncle, who had not removed his eyes from the fire ; “ an only son. You think I ought to have told you of this long ago, and perhaps you are right ; though there is something to be said upon the other side. Either way, I am not excusing myself. I can only make things intelligible by beginning at the beginning and going on to the end ; and if I might ask a favour of you, it would be to say nothing until I have finished.”

He glanced at me for an instant with an odd, shamed look in his eyes, poor old fellow, and I nodded. Then immediately he turned his head away, and, staring at the glowing coals again, resumed :

“ My son Harry was born about five-and-thirty years ago. As it soon became evident that he was to be an only child, it was not unnatural that we should have been wrapped up in him, or that we should have talked and thought more about him than about any other subject. His mother may have indulged him a little more than was prudent, but she always gave way to me, and I was determined that the boy should not be spoiled. Then I lost her, and I had nothing but Harry left in the world to live for.

“I say that I had nothing else to live for, because at that time I accepted the Chiltern Hundreds, and turned my back upon public life for ever—which was probably a foolish mistake on my part. However, I believed that I had done with ambition and pleasure, and my one wish was to do my duty to the boy. As a younger man I had unlimited confidence in theories, and my theory upon the subject of training was that the Alpha and Omega of it was discipline. I still think that this is sound enough as a theory, but what I had not learnt then was that, in a world so full of paradox and unexpected turns as ours, theories must be made elastic enough to adapt themselves to subjects, and that subjects cannot by any manner of means be stretched so as to fit theories. I set to work upon Harry, and tried to make him understand that I represented inexorable justice quite as much as fatherly love. I never overlooked a fault, I never remitted a punishment, I never dared to be quite natural with the boy, or to let him suspect that I punished myself every time that I punished him—and unfortunately he required a good deal of punishment. Once he told

me a lie, and I flogged him for it. I haven't a doubt but that this was the right thing to do, theoretically ; but practically it happened to be quite the wrong thing. Instead of securing the boy's affection, I taught him to fear and avoid me, and, worst of all, I did not cure him of telling lies. After that first time, he deceived me repeatedly, and I found him out ; but I never flogged him again, because the instinct of self-preservation kept him from lying directly, and it was a part of my theory that offences which could not be proved must be ignored. Of course I saw that I had failed, but I persevered with the system that I had marked out for myself all the same. You are saying to yourself, 'what a fool the man must have been !—what a prig !—what a stupid pedant !' Perhaps so ; and yet I had taught the boy some good things. I had taught him to keep his temper, for instance, and to show physical courage when necessary, and to be punctual and cleanly. I don't know that my failure proves much, except that it takes a man of special gifts to make a schoolmaster.

"In due time the professional schoolmaster relieved me of a part of my duties, and then

things went better. Harry was clever and quick at learning; besides which he was good at athletics. He was very much liked by his school-fellows, and he brought home excellent reports from his masters; so that all the neighbourhood congratulated me, and gave me credit for being a wise and judicious parent. But only the wearer knows where the shoe pinches. I was not proud of Harry, because, unfortunately, I could not help seeing that he was not to be trusted, and I was not happy with him, because he disliked me. Neither could I overcome his dislike. I tried my best, but it was too late, I suppose, and we never became friends.

“I tell you all this in a matter-of-course sort of way; but it was a great grief to me at the time. Besides Harry, I had literally not a soul in the world to care for, for my brother Tom was away in India, and my mother was in Scotland with her husband, and I lived the life of a hermit. To him, naturally, our relations were not a matter of so much importance. He had plenty of friends of his own age, and during his holidays he was a great deal away from home. I made no objection to his staying with these young fellows, for I

wished him to enjoy himself, and I believed that their society would do him more good than mine.

“So the years went on, and though there could not be much sympathy between us, I do not remember that we had more than one difference of any consequence. That was shortly before he left school, when he came with a frightened face to tell me that he had been running up ‘ticks’ in Windsor and Eton, and didn’t see how he was to pay. That in itself was no very dire offence, and seeing how ashamed of himself he looked, I made light of the matter, and assured him that if he would let me know what he owed and the names of his tradespeople, the money should be paid directly. Well, he didn’t tell me the truth; there were more bills than he had led me to expect, and the amount of them was about double what he had mentioned. That again, you may say, was nothing so very terrible; people, under such circumstances, very rarely do tell the exact truth, and the chances are that they seldom know it. Still his needless duplicity vexed me, and when it transpired that he had borrowed what between boys was really a large sum of money from a schoolfellow, I fairly lost my temper, and gave

him my opinion of his conduct in stronger language, perhaps, than the occasion warranted. You see it hurt me to think that my son should have gone to a stranger to ask for money, instead of applying to me, for I had never given him any reason to suppose me niggardly, but I did not wish to reproach him with this so much as to read him a lesson which should prevent him from doing the same thing a second time. So I told him that no gentleman would have acted as he had done, and a good deal more to the like effect, which I ought not to have said, and which did not in the least produce the result I intended. He listened to me without answering me back—he was a great deal too much alarmed of me, I am sorry to say, even to dream of that—but he grew sullen at last, and when I asked him to give me his word that he would not, under any circumstances, request a loan of a friend again, he gave it me, and then muttered, ‘Not that it is much use my promising, though, for you never believe a word that I say.’

“Every now and then it happens that some one—probably without knowing what he is doing—says a thing which goes through one’s heart

like a knife. When the poor boy made that perfectly just charge against me, I could have fallen on my knees before him and implored his pardon. Unhappily, I knew him to be an habitual liar, but I had never thought that he suspected me of knowing it, and I saw now how cruel my manner must have been towards him, and how inevitable it was that he should shrink from a father who seemed to despise him. Perhaps, if I had said as much, it might have done some good; but I did not think it would be wise to do that; and, being unable to contradict him, I made no reply at all, but went away into my study, and was thoroughly miserable.

“Harry was not long with me at this time. He had made up his mind, some years before, that he would like to go into the Guards, and very soon after he left Eton he joined the battalion to which he had been gazetted. For about a year I heard nothing but good reports of him from all quarters. His Colonel, whom I knew something of, and who good-naturedly wrote me a line from time to time, praised him; he had some of his old schoolfellows for brother officers; he went a good deal into society, was much liked

by the ladies, and led the sort of life which I suppose that young Guardsmen who have the gift of making themselves popular ordinarily lead. A man may employ his time better than in dancing, flirting, pigeon-shooting, and attending race-meetings ; but then again he may employ it much worse ; and if he have, as Harry had, an amount of intelligence decidedly above the average, such amusements are sure to pall upon him in the long run. I was quite content to wait, and let things take their course, and so long as the lad kept out of low company and behaved himself like a gentleman, I asked nothing more of him. I did not even ask him to come and see me, knowing that it gave him no pleasure to do so ; and, as a matter of fact, he never did come when he could find an excuse for remaining away.

“But after a time rumours began to reach me which made me uneasy. Harry was an excellent judge of a horse, and it was said that he was in the habit of turning his knowledge to account in ways which are not considered exactly dishonest, but which certainly do not tend to make a man respected. It also came to my ears that he was

losing and winning large sums on the turf—sums very much larger than either he or I could afford to risk. I had to write to him upon both of these subjects, and he sent me plausible replies, which I tried to believe, but did not succeed in believing. And then, to crown all, came a very awkward and unpleasant business, which would probably have obliged Harry to leave the service if his Colonel had not rather stretched a point to befriend him. I never heard precise particulars of the affair, and they are of no importance: the bare facts were that Harry lost several thousand pounds at play one night, and repudiated the debt next morning upon the plea that he had been so drunk as to have no recollection of what had taken place. That, stripped of superfluous flourishes, was what he communicated to me in a very penitent letter—written, I take it, when the general clamour had reached such a height that it was no longer possible to keep me in ignorance of it. No doubt you will think, as I did, that the excuse was worse than the offence; but I did not say this to him. I merely sent him the money, requesting him to pay what he owed forthwith, and expressing a hope that this would

be a warning to him to let cards alone for the future. Meanwhile there had been a terrible fuss in London, where the whole story had been made in a measure public, and where the tide of feeling set strongly against the defaulter. However, as I said, the Colonel took up the cudgels for Harry, declaring that the poor young fellow had fallen among rooks (which may have been true, for aught I know to the contrary); and when once the money was paid, this trouble soon blew over, and was forgotten. So at least my good friend the Colonel assured me; but, in truth, troubles of that description are seldom quite forgotten. I heard afterwards that at this time the ladies with one consent showed Harry the cold shoulder, and that many of their husbands followed suit—as husbands are apt to do, according to my experience. Very likely this drove him into company which he might not otherwise have frequented. As for me, I could not at all forget what had happened, and for months afterwards I lived in constant dread of hearing that my son had fallen into some fresh disgrace. Yet I never anticipated anything half so bad as the actual catastrophe which was about to fall upon us. There

are things which must always seem impossible—even after they are over.

“ You will understand that it is difficult to me to speak about this. I need say no more than that Harry was discovered cheating at cards. Of course that meant absolute, irretrievable ruin. If it had happened quietly, and among his brother officers, it is just possible that, out of good nature and for the credit of the regiment, they would have hushed the thing up, and allowed him to sneak out of the service and hide his head anywhere that he pleased ; but it took place at a well-known club, and the man who detected him pulled him into St. James’ Street, and thrashed him before a dozen witnesses. All London was talking about it the next day, and all England knew of it the day after. The newspapers were full of the scandal ; leading articles were written upon it ; no disgrace could have been more complete or more public. The unhappy wretch crept down here to tell me that he had been cashiered, and crouched before me, looking as if he thought I should strike him—perhaps he did think so.

“ I don’t know, Charley, what you would have

done, or what other men would have done, in my place ; but what I did was this. I told him that, after what had occurred, it was quite impossible that he should ever show his face in the county again, or that he should succeed me as owner of a property which had hitherto been held only by gentlemen. The entail having, fortunately, been cut off, I was in a position to dictate terms upon that point. I promised to pay him thenceforth an annual sum sufficient for his needs, upon the understanding that he should never make any attempt to see me again, and I suggested that he should go to one of the colonies. He objected to this, however, preferring a residence upon the Continent, and I did not press the point. There was nothing more to be said, and he left the house for the last time that same evening."

"And have you never seen or heard of him since?" I asked, after my uncle had remained for some minutes without speaking.

"I have never seen him since," he answered quietly. "I have heard of him more than once; but always indirectly. It is extremely unlikely that we shall ever meet face to face again."

There was a long pause. My uncle, who had

not once lifted his eyes to mine during the course of his narrative, was leaning back in his chair now, and looking at me much as usual. He seemed exhausted ; but I could see by the expression of his face that he felt the relief of having accomplished a painful task ; and I saw also that he expected me to make some remark upon what I had been told. Obviously, it behoved me to say something ; but what I was to say I hardly knew, and for the first time, perhaps, in my life, I found myself out of sympathy with my old man. He seemed to have been so unlike himself in his dealings with his unfortunate son ; his conduct throughout had been, according to his own account, so very nearly the opposite of what I should have expected it to be, that I was disappointed as well as puzzled. I quite understood that he should assume a more or less cold and indifferent manner, and I knew that he would represent his own behaviour in the least favourable light ; but there was no getting over the facts, and I could not help thinking that he had been harsh and ungenerous, if he had not been positively unjust. At last, in default of any more pertinent observation, I said : " You

must have been very lonely after he went away."

"I don't know that it ever occurred to me to consider my situation from that point of view," answered my uncle, with a faint smile; "but if I was lonely, it was not for very long. I had scarcely lost one son before I found another in yourself. I adopted you, as you know, and I hope that, in bringing you up, I did not fall into the same fatal errors as I had done before. I have tried, at all events, to avoid them. And now I must explain to you what you have unquestionably a right to know—the nature of your position and prospects. I have never given you to understand that you would inherit this place at my death; yet it is possible—probable, indeed, that you will. It was certainly my intention when I adopted you that you should succeed me at Thirlby, my natural heir being as good as dead; but I would not make my decision irrevocable; nor can I make it so now, in spite of the urgency of my friends and yours. I admit that this is a little hard upon you; but I am sorry to say that I can't see my way to acting otherwise, and I hope in any case to be able to

leave you a substantial addition to your own small fortune."

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that!" I exclaimed, feeling sore and resentful, without any very good reason for feeling so. "I don't want to be the owner of Thirlby; I never thought in my life about whether you would leave me money or not; and I hate to discuss your death in that cold-blooded manner. Don't you know that to lose you would be the greatest misfortune that could possibly happen to me?"

"My dear Charley," answered my uncle, "you may have—and, unless you are very exceptionally lucky, I am afraid you certainly will have—many a worse misfortune than that before your own time comes to die. In the natural course of things I shall step off the stage one of these days, and by that time you will see, maybe, that there is nothing to lament over in an old man's going to his rest; though I don't anticipate your adopting the opinion of my mother, who says you will have a right to curse my memory if I don't leave you every acre of which I am possessed. My mother is more convinced than convincing in her views. For

years she never lost an opportunity of impressing upon me that it was my duty to 'let bygones be bygones,' as she called it, and to reinstate Harry in the position which he had forfeited ; but now you have made a conquest of her heart, and she is in a terrible fright lest I should die intestate, and the question of succession be settled by the law of the land. The Rector holds a brief for the other side. He has a great deal to say, and says it very well, about abstract justice and parental responsibility ; and I am sure it has never struck him that I must know every word of it by heart from having said it all to myself in years gone by. Where he and my mother agree is in deprecating suspense. 'Let the thing be decided once for all, in this way or in that,' they say ; and then, as I only hold my tongue, they get angry and call me names."

"Uncle Bernard," I began, hesitatingly ; "would you mind my saying what I think ?"

"I should like you to say what you think," he answered.

"Well, then," I resumed, "I know that Mrs. Farquhar's opinion isn't worth much, and the Rector, I dare say, is not over-wise, and of

course neither of them is fit to advise you. Still, it does seem to me that she was right at first, and that he is right now. One calls a fellow who cheats at cards a blackguard, and so he is, I suppose ; but this happened a long time ago, and he must have been very young then, and—and—don't you think he might have another chance given him ? I am not such an ass as to pretend to tell you what your duty is ; only I fancy that you may have been a little too severe upon this poor chap just because he was your own son. I feel sure that, if it had been any one else, you would have been the first person in the world to forgive and forget."

I fully meant what I said, and I said what I meant from no other motive than that I did mean it ; nevertheless, I must admit that I was conscious of acting a disinterested part ; and I was altogether taken aback when my uncle, instead of looking pleased with me, started to his feet with an impatient gesture and a flash of genuine anger in his mild blue eyes.

"Forgive and forget !" he exclaimed ; "have you known me all your life, Charley, only to say such a foolish thing as that ? Am I vindictive ?

Have you ever known me bear malice against any one who had offended or injured me ? ”

I shook my head, somewhat abashed.

“ Or do you suppose,” my uncle went on, “ that I, of all people in the world, have the pretension to forgive another man’s sins ? I thought you would have understood—I thought it would not be necessary to point out to you in so many words that I am doubly disgraced by Harry’s ruin. Disgraced, not only because my name has been dragged down into the dirt by my son, but because I failed to make such a disaster impossible. Consider the tremendous risk involved in cheating at cards, and the very small gain, in proportion to it, that a successful cheat can hope to make. Surely you must see how terribly wrong must have been my management of a young man who, rather than ask me for a few hundreds, or even thousands, would play so desperate a game as that ! And if I could say to such a one, ‘ I forgive you from the bottom of my heart. The sin may have been yours, but the cause of the sin was mine ; let us cry quits and start afresh ! ’ do you think I would not say it, and shake off a part, at least,

of the load of remorse which I have been carrying about all these years, and which I must carry to my grave—and beyond it ?”

He paused, drawing his breath quickly ; then resumed his seat and went on in a calmer tone : “ I told you before that I don’t know what you, or any one else, would have done in my place ; I had to act as seemed to me right ; and if it were to do over again, I could not act differently. It is easy to forgive an injury ; but it is only in certain cases that one can blot out an offence. There are sins as bad as, or worse than, Harry’s, which it is perfectly possible to condone. A man may run away with his neighbour’s wife, for instance, and resume his place in society when he chooses, if he will only show his penitence by deserting her. With regard to turf transactions again, he may sail very near the wind indeed, and be pardoned ; and there are many other slippery places through which he may walk with a tolerable certainty of being able to emerge from them in due season. But he must not be caught with a card up his sleeve and publicly thrashed. A man to whom such a thing as that has happened is a dead man, and no living being

can resuscitate him. This, I know, is only conventional morality. I am not concerned to make an apology for it; though I think that, if you come to look into them, there is more to be said for the world's conventional rules of conduct than some people are willing to allow. What is certain is that, being in the world, we must submit to its standards. What was it in my power to do for Harry? Could I have kept him with me here, in the vain hope that at last he might live his disgrace down? Why, he would never have had the chance of living it down. There is not a man in the county who would have spoken to him—at all events not a gentleman who would. To the very last day of his life he would have been pointed out as the man who—etc., etc. Neither he nor I could have borne it.”

“Oh no,” I agreed; “you couldn’t have attempted that.”

“Well?”

“Well; I should have thought a compromise might have been made. I should have thought that, after having been away for a great many years, he might have been allowed to come back. Scandals *are* forgotten, you know; and I sup-

pose it is pretty certain that he would do nothing to remind people of the one that he caused."

My uncle did not answer just at once. "I have done my best to consider the whole question dispassionately," he said at length, "and I have never been able to think that it would be at all possible for Harry to recover his position. It is not likely that you and I shall ever talk again as we are doing now, and while we are about it, it is as well to say all. I have always felt that, if I had understood the lad better, I could have averted this terrible misfortune, and I don't desire to lessen my share of the responsibility; but it would be absurd to blink the fact that my errors of judgment will not account for everything. I have only too good reason to know that he is by nature cowardly, deceitful, and unprincipled. Theoretically, one is bound to believe that it is never too late to mend; but all experience shows that there are certain natures—characters—whatever you like to call them—which never do mend, and I believe that his is one of them. When the crash came he was not ashamed; only frightened to death. He went away, hardly concealing his satisfaction at having got off so cheaply. Since

then he has made no sort of effort to retrieve himself. I know where he is now, and I know more or less accurately, the kind of life that he is leading. I believe his case to be an absolutely hopeless one. Nevertheless I will not say decidedly that he shall not be my heir. Of course I have made my will; and if I were to drop down dead to-morrow you would inherit everything, except a sum sufficient to produce the interest upon which Harry is now living, and which I have left in the hands of trustees for his use. But it is within the bounds of possibility that I may alter my will; and for that you must be prepared. There is just the shadow of a shade of hope that Harry might distinguish himself in some public manner, so as to wipe out in a measure his past disgrace. That is a very forlorn hope, still it must be taken into account. There is another hope scarcely less forlorn, and that is that he might marry (though I cannot imagine that any lady would marry him), and that he might have children. In such a case, it would be a question whether I should be justified in shutting out my grandson from the estate. Now, Charley, you see how the matter stands;

you see that, so far as you are concerned, you will have to shape your course so as to meet possible chances rather than probabilities ; and you also see, I hope, that the less the miserable business is referred to between us in future the better."

I signified my assent, and a long interval of silence followed. "I can't help feeling sorry for the poor beggar," I said at last.

"It is not forbidden to you to be sorry for him," answered my uncle a little coldly. I was almost angry with him for the moment ; but when I looked at his poor old sad face, as he sat patiently there by the fireside, my irritation turned to pity, and I could not resist the impulse to get up and lay my hand on his shoulder.

"I'm awfully sorry for you too," I said.

He jumped up, and began poking the fire. "Oh, well—thank you, Charley," he answered briskly, "but you see I have grown accustomed to it—and there are plenty of enjoyments in life after all. Life is not all tragedy, fortunately ; and we couldn't make it so even if we would." He turned round with that faint smile of his playing about the corners of his mouth and eyes. "Perhaps," he said, "you are not likely to fall

into the error of taking too tragic a view of life." And then—"By the way, the Rector tells me that Oxford is going to turn out the weakest crew this year that ever disgraced the University. I trust that is a calumny."

I replied that the Rector obviously did not know what he was talking about, and showed how impossible it was that he, or any one else, could be in a position to judge a crew which had not yet been formed; but although we discussed the subject with much gravity for the next five minutes, I was unable to rouse myself to that degree of interest in it which it merited, and when my uncle observed that I was sleepy and had better go to bed, I did not contradict him, unfounded as the assertion was.

He spoke a few last words as he bade me good-night. "Now we have had our talk and it is all over. We may have to refer to it again some day; but it is much more probable that we shall never be compelled to do so. You are startled and a little puzzled just now; but that will pass. You won't forget it, I hope; you will soon cease to think about it, I know. And that is just what I should wish."



CHAPTER IX.

MY UNCLE IS DISAPPOINTED IN ME.

I WAS not altogether pleased with my uncle's quiet conviction that I should soon cease to think about the skeleton in the family cupboard which had been so tardily dragged forth from its hiding-place for my inspection ; but the event proved him to be right in this, as I am bound to say that he was in most things. I did not think then, and don't think now, that he was right in having kept me all those years in the dark. As to whether he had been right in his treatment of his son, that is a point upon which I have never yet been able to make up my mind, and at this time of day it is hardly likely that I ever shall.

One judge, whose summings-up, if somewhat difficult to forecast, were always decisive, and who was seldom disposed to endorse any act or deed of Mr. Le Marchant's with the stamp of

her approval, was upon this occasion openly, not to say triumphantly, on his side.

"I have been delighted to hear," said Mrs. Farquhar, accosting me the next morning with a good deal of affectionate warmth, "that your Uncle Bernard has at last made up his mind to do the right thing. It is what we should all be thankful for; for he is over given to vacillation, poor man! and just a wee bit obstinate besides, between ourselves. But all's well that ends well. Better a finger off than aye wagging, as we say in Scotland; he'll be easier in his mind now that he has chosen his heir, and knows who will come after him. And, indeed, I think he might have made a worse choice," the old lady added, nodding at me and patting me on the back in an exceedingly flattering manner.

I thanked her; but pointed out that the finger alluded to in her graceful figure of speech could hardly yet be considered as having ceased to wag. My uncle, I said, had done nothing more than take me into his confidence; he had formed no final decision as to the disposal of his property, and had expressly warned me that he did not contemplate forming any. But Mrs. Farquhar

listened to this disclaimer with a smile of amiable derision.

"Oh, aye ; he would say that," she answered ; and it was evident that she was in no mood to grudge unimportant concessions to a character feebler than her own. "It's just Bernard's way to make a show of leaving things open, and to pretend he can step out through the window after the door is locked behind him ; but I'm not afraid of his breaking his neck in any such foolish fashion. Depend upon it, he would never have spoken to you about the matter at all if he had not known very well that there was only one course open to him. I believe he has really made his will too." There was an interrogative inflection in these last words.

"He can make another to-morrow," I observed.

"But he won't," Mrs. Farquhar replied confidently. "He'll not do that ; you may take my word for it. When duty and inclination pull the same way, it must be a very perverse man that would hold back." She added presently with a laugh, "I should know something of the way Bernard's inclinations pull him ;—haven't I been doing my best to get him to disinherit you for

the last ten years and more ? And all in vain !”

There was nothing surprising in Mrs. Farquhar's inclination and sense of duty (which always pulled harmoniously together) having drawn her in one direction for ten years, and then whisked round and hurried her in the opposite one at the end of them ; but I was curious to know the cause of her inconsistency in the present case ; so I put the question to her point-blank. She sighed and shook her head, saying that it was a long story, and that she would rather not go into it now that it was all over ; immediately after which she proceeded to relate it to me in all its length.

Mrs. Farquhar, it appeared, had from the first taken a much more lenient view of Harry's offence than his father had done. Cheating at cards was very wrong, of course ; but it was evident that in her eyes this form of iniquity was not a great deal worse than many others into which young men are liable to fall, and that the punishment which had overtaken the culprit struck her as out of all proportion to his sin. She had, therefore, laboured for many years to bring about the reconciliation which Christian duty, natural affec-

tion, and regard for the perpetuation of the family name had alike seemed to demand. She had corresponded with Harry pretty regularly; she had even seen him once or twice; she had always exhorted him to keep a good heart and bide his time; and if her efforts had been unsuccessful, it was because she had had to contend, not only against my uncle's passive obstinacy, but against the active opposition of Mr. Farquhar, who, she allowed me to infer, had been a man of limited intelligence and uncertain temper.

"But I would never have let that discourage me," she declared; and I quite believed her. No! it was neither difficulty nor weariness that had caused her to swerve from her purpose, but the conviction, slowly and unwillingly admitted, that Harry was not one who could be safely trusted to maintain the credit of the Le Marchants. "I'm afraid he's just a ne'er-do-weel," she sighed, speaking sadly, yet with an undercurrent of resignation which was almost satisfaction in her tone—"a ne'er-do-weel and—and a spendthrift. I should tell you that I have supplied him with funds from time to time, not knowing how large an allowance your uncle has

been in the habit of making him ; for he entirely deceived me as to that. And he has never done any work, or tried to do any. For some time past I felt that I must give him up ; and lately I heard worse things of him. They say,"—here Mrs. Farquhar lowered her voice to an awestruck whisper—"they say he is—eh ! well—given to his bottle."

This announcement did not shock me so much as she apparently expected that it would do. That a proscribed man, with no occupation, should take to drinking was not very strange : nor could I see why one who had sunk so low as my luckless cousin had done, should be abandoned as irreclaimable on account of one additional vice. But it was hardly likely that my theory of morals should accord with Mrs. Farquhar's, and it did not seem worth while to interrupt her. She went on to say that, after seeing me, she had come to the conclusion that—whether by good luck or judgment she would not take upon her to determine—Bernard had made a happy hit in adopting me, and that she believed it to be the will of Heaven that I should occupy the place which Harry had forfeited.

I saw no reason to doubt the sincerity of Mrs.

Farquhar's conversion. Without vanity, I certainly did consider myself entitled to a rather larger share of respect than my uncle's natural heir could lay claim to, and I also thought it highly probable that my personal fascinations had had their effect upon this appreciative old lady. What I did not quite understand at that time was her intense dread of riotous living in a pecuniary sense. It was, I believe, by no means her partiality for me, but her recent discovery that the man whom she had supposed to be an out-at-elbows pauper was really in receipt of a sufficient income, that had scared her, and led her to desert his cause. She was anything but an avaricious woman — indeed, she could be extremely generous upon occasion — but she loved order and economy, and would never have forgiven herself if she had been the means of handing over the Thirlby acres to a proprietor who would probably sell or mortgage them.

I did not get much more information about Harry out of her. She had ceased to answer his letters, she told me; she did not know where he was then, nor, for that matter, where he was likely to be at any given time. She knew that he

was sometimes in London, because she had more than once met him there by appointment; but his usual custom was to wander about in foreign countries, "living by his wits, I fear," she said with another sigh.

Upon the whole, I gathered that the man was a sort of *chevalier d'industrie*. Doubtless he was a bad lot, and doubtless also I was entitled to accept with a clear conscience the reversion of his birthright; yet I disliked the idea of playing Jacob to anybody's Esau. I took it into my head that it would be rather a fine thing to discover and reclaim this prodigal, to restore him, weeping and repentant, to his sorrowing father, and then to go out into the world to seek my fortune, with nothing to trust to beyond my natural talents and the interest of the very small fortune which my parents had left behind them. What is the good of being young if one is not to indulge in the sublime and ridiculous notions which belong to youth? I had a fine stock of these, together with many other youthful and useful attributes; among which latter was a faculty of receiving impressions and casting them off again with marvellous rapidity. For a day

or two, my mind was almost exclusively occupied with Harry's fortunes and misfortunes; but as he was not again spoken of by any of those about me, and as I presently returned to Oxford, where I found numerous matters of importance to attend to, my uncle's prophecy was ere long fulfilled to the letter, and although I did not forget what I had been told, I ceased to think about it.

I can't look back on that period of my career exactly with pride; yet those were merry days, and, all things considered, I am not so much ashamed of the way in which I spent them as I perhaps ought to be. I was lazy and rather extravagant, but, except in these trifling particulars, I believe I did no great harm to myself or my neighbours. I was not selected to form one of the University eight; and at this distance of time I may say what I could not have admitted then, that my exclusion was both a surprise and a disappointment to me. Being thus debarred from a safe outlet for superfluous energy, I fell back upon other forms of diversion, and devoted my time to playing the fool very noisily and enjoyably in company with sundry young gentlemen who are now old gentlemen, and whom

respect for gray hairs and honourable position forbids me to mention by name. I wonder whether Archdeacon Blank (so to call him) remembers that Easter vacation that we spent together, the incidents of which, as related on many subsequent occasions by one of us—I won't say which one—added so greatly to our joint renown. I suppose he can hardly have forgotten those bygone pranks ; and yet, when I met him the other day, he altogether refused to understand my discreet insinuations, and persisted in talking as though he had been an Archdeacon all his life ; whereas he must know perfectly well that, as lately as thirty years ago or thereabouts, he did not wear a shovel hat and gaiters, but a short driving-coat, with buttons as large as soup-plates, and a pair of nether garments of a window-pane pattern.

I say that the future Archdeacon—who was a sad dog in those days, and liked to be told that he was so—persuaded me to pass that Easter vacation in his company, I having determined not to go home—for reasons. The truth was that I had promised to get Maud a dog ; and, after due and anxious search, I bought that dog—as

well-bred a broken-haired terrier and as good a ratter as ever I saw in my life—and paid five pounds for him; and what better excuse for writing to her could I have than to tell her of the acquisition that I had made, and to dwell a little upon his noble qualities? Well; I got a most unpleasant snub for my pains. She did not even deign to answer my letter; but I received an illegible scrawl from the Rector, who informed me that he wrote in great haste (never did I know the Rector write otherwise than in great haste) to say that Maud was very much obliged for the trouble I had taken, but that really they had too many dogs about the place as it was, and that, upon the whole, she must ask me, with many thanks, to keep my new purchase for my own amusement. The Rector added, on his own score, that he hoped I didn't encourage the little beggar to worry cats; a cruel practice, and one which he understood was coming far too much into favour with young fellows. Not, mind you, that he had anything to say against a charge of shot upon occasion. Such a method of getting rid of a poaching beast of a tabby was merciful and necessary; but—etc. etc.

I hadn't the patience to finish his letter. I was very angry indeed ; and my feelings were so deeply wounded that I resolved to punish Miss Dennison and myself by not showing my face in Thirlby before the summer. So Blank and I went off together in a high dog-cart, and we drove through several counties ; and the games that we carried on, and the scrapes that we got into and out of, it would ill become me to dwell upon, since it seems that my former companion wishes all memory of them to be buried in oblivion. It will be understood that mine was a hollow gaiety, and that the recklessness of my conduct was merely due to a Spartan determination to conceal the aching of my heart. I am not aware that Blank had any such excuse to bring forward in justification of his goings-on.

George Warren, who at this time was reading hard for his degree, and had little leisure for desultory conversation, must have been bored almost beyond endurance by the love-sick Jeremiads which I inflicted upon him occasionally when under the influence of an access of low spirits. But he always listened to me patiently, and said what he could, in his quiet, sensible

way, to console me. From all that he had observed, he was inclined to think that Maud was favourably disposed towards me, and that the incident of her refusal of the terrier was one to which too much importance should not be attached. Nevertheless, it was his opinion—an opinion expressed with a good deal of proper diffidence—that Miss Dennison was not the girl to engage herself to any man until he had done something to prove himself worthy of her. To be a good judge of a dog was all very well ; but it was not exactly the sort of gift which would be likely to earn for its possessor a distinguished career. “And you see, Charley, Miss Dennison—as far as I can judge—is just one of those ladies who would wish her husband to be a distinguished man.”

I assured George that he knew nothing about women, and he at once admitted his ignorance ; but I felt that there was something to be said for his view, and that at all events it would be desirable that Maud’s future husband should be in a position to earn his bread, whether with or without distinction. George, who had a conviction, which I partly shared, that I could do anything that I really desired to do, suggested that

I might make a beginning by reading for honours ; but this method of achieving fame found little favour in my eyes. I was getting rather tired of Oxford, which I never liked half as well as Eton, and I was eager to get out into the world and have done with preliminaries.

It was while I was in this disposition of mind that I received a letter from my uncle which excited and elated me considerably. "My brother Tom," he wrote, "has been interesting himself on your behalf, and I have just heard from him that he has succeeded in getting your name on Lord ——'s list for the diplomatic service. He fancies—and I am disposed to agree with him—that this profession would suit you as well as another ; possibly better than most. Write and tell me what you think of it. Diplomacy, as I dare say you know, brings no grist to the mill ; but perhaps, under all circumstances, we need not consider that an insuperable objection. If you decide upon adopting it, you will have to set to work upon certain special subjects without delay ; for Tom tells me that the list is an unusually short one. I am not sure whether it might not be better for you to leave the Uni-

versity without taking your degree ; but this and other matters can stand over until we meet."

Nothing could have chimed in more harmoniously with my inclinations. In these days of democracy and telegrams and penny newspapers, diplomacy has lost much of its *prestige* and doubtless also something of its power ; but thirty years or so ago it was more respectfully thought of. Echoes of the fame of some great professors of that art still lingered in the air ; a few were living, and enjoyed a European celebrity ; and although among these was no Englishman—or at best, only one—there seemed no reason at all why the credit of the nation should not be retrieved by a young and brilliant addition to its staff of representatives abroad ; while it was obvious that an Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary would be a sufficiently distinguished personage to satisfy Miss Dennison's ambitious desires. "Perhaps a recruit might chance to shoot Great General Boneyparty," I remarked to George Warren, who, in his dull, unimaginative way had pointed out to me that Ambassadors are commonly elderly men, and are not invariably selected from the ranks of the service which they adorn.

A few weeks after this George and I went down to Norfolk together. George had taken his degree—a second—and was in a mood of temperate triumph, but I, who was taking no sheaves home with me, except, indeed, a sheaf of unpaid bills, was in far higher spirits than he. George, poor fellow, was going to be a lawyer—to labour and grind in dusty chambers and fusty law-courts through long years, and perhaps earn a mere pittance at the end of all; whereas I was going to be a gay *attaché*, to see the world in the pleasantest acceptation of that term, and to take my place by right in the innermost circles of its society. The difference between us was enormous; and he admitted without question the superior brilliancy of my destiny. I don't think it ever occurred to modest old George to doubt my superiority, even intellectually; and when a little deputation, composed of the Rector and some other neighbours, met us at the station and greeted him with effusive congratulations and hand-shakings, he stared and stammered and looked appealingly at me, as if he thought—which no doubt he did—that they had got hold of the wrong man.

I did not grudge George his honours, academical or other ; nor did I mind the Rector's looking over his shoulder to call out, " Now Charley, my boy, you do as much—do as much, if you can ! "—which was the only greeting he vouchsafed to me. It was not the Rector's applause which I coveted ; and what, after all, was a second ? A distinction of which it was more than likely that Maud did not understand the meaning. And this suspicion of mine received speedy confirmation ; for, when we had passed out of the station to the road, there was Maud herself sitting in the pony-carriage waiting for her father ; and almost the first thing that she said to me was :

" What is it all about ? I suppose George has done something wonderful ; but an ignorant person would hardly guess it. If there are seconds, there must be firsts, and surely it is rather a poor compliment to a man to make such a fuss over him because he has finished behind a whole class of others. It is as much as to say, ' Who would have thought of your getting placed at all ! ' Now, it would never have struck me, for instance, that I ought to congratulate you

upon having nearly, but not quite, got into the University eight." And with that unkind and uncalled-for allusion she drove away.

It was some days before I saw her again. Not that I did not make many attempts and invent divers ingenious pretexts to secure a meeting ; but, from one cause or another, none of these proved successful ; and when I did meet her, it always so chanced that there was a third person present. For more than a week this constant ill-luck pursued me. If I lay in wait for Maud in the village, all I gained by it was the privilege of sharing her society with Mrs. Bunce, or some other intrusive old woman ; if I walked over to the Rectory, there was no getting rid of the Rector ; and although, upon these occasions, she was as friendly as ever, that was not what I desired. I wanted to see her alone, and I was not at all sure that I wanted her to be friendly. At least I wished her to show some consciousness that there had been a coolness between us, and that it was owing to that coolness that I had absented myself at Easter ; whereas she appeared determined to ignore both these circumstances. At the end of a fortnight it became evident that

Maud was avoiding me purposely ; and I was growing very indignant, not to say sulky, when the opportunity which always comes to those who wait came to me.

On the north-east shore of Thirlby Broad, in the part where the reeds and rushes are highest, and where the woods meet the water, there is a little quiet creek, in which, long ago, a rotten old flat-bottomed punt used always to lie moored. It was seldom visited, save by sportsmen, the treacherous nature of the ground over which it must be approached making it somewhat difficult of access ; and indeed the spot has no attractions powerful enough to tempt any one into risking a wetting in order to reach it, unless it be at the hour of sunset, when, looking down the vista of reeds, you get a curious narrowed view of what looks like a lake of fire. Seen thus, as through a funnel, the distance is greatly exaggerated, so that to the eye of the imaginative spectator those dazzling ripples appear to stretch far away to the very edge of the world, and to lose themselves at last in the bosom of the great sinking sun himself. Some ragged stakes rise, huge and black, in the foreground, and in the middle dis-

tance is a tiny islet overgrown with bulrushes ; but the opposite shore cannot be seen, because of the mist which hangs over it, and which seems to form one with the red glory of the sky. Such as it is, that scrap of landscape has remained clearly stamped upon my memory, from which the outlines of many more notable ones have faded away ; for it was at the spot and the hour which I have attempted to describe that I came unexpectedly upon Maud Dennison one still summer evening, and it was then and there that an interview of the highest importance and interest took place.

I had strolled down to the Broad to satisfy myself as to the well-being of some ducks which Bunce and I had left among the reeds as a decoy ; and it is probable that, if I had had the smallest suspicion that I was likely to encounter Maud in the course of my walk, I should not have arrayed myself in my oldest clothes and a pair of high wading-boots. There, however, she was, sitting in the punt with her back turned towards me and her hands clasped round her knees, and I could not allow a mere question of costume to stand between me and the happiness of joining

her. She started up from her contemplation of the sunset when the splash of advancing steps caught her ear, and on recognising me made as though she would have disembarked and retired; but she did not act upon this impulse because, for one thing, she could not have stepped upon firm land without some preliminary manœuvring with the punt-pole, and, for another, I was not going to let her escape; and, doubtless, determination was written upon my brow.

“Why do you always treat me as if I had the plague?” I asked reproachfully, after I had waded up to the side of the punt, and had been allowed the privilege of holding her slim fingers for a moment. “You would have bolted now, if it hadn’t happened to be physically impossible; you invariably do bolt as soon as I appear. I wish you would tell me why.”

As she made no reply I added pathetically, “And I had such a lot of things to say to you too !”

She had resumed her seat and her former attitude, and was now once more devoting the whole of her attention to the sunset instead of to me. “Say on,” she returned composedly.

"I will," said I, "as soon as you have answered my question."

She turned her head for a moment to inquire, "Did you ask me a question?"

"You know I did. I asked you why you always run away from me now."

"Oh, I am sure I never ran."

"You walked very fast, at all events. Honestly now, isn't it true that you have been trying to keep out of my way for the last fortnight?"

Maud hesitated for a short space; but at last made up her mind to say, "Oh, yes; it is quite true, since you will insist upon knowing. I have my reasons for wishing to deprive you of my company just at present."

"And might I inquire what those reasons are?"

"No; you might not. They are stupid reasons. Or rather, they are good reasons enough of their kind; only they can't very well be talked about without some embarrassment—which is certainly stupid. Does that satisfy you?"

"Not a bit," I replied.

"Ah, then I am afraid you will have to remain in a state of dissatisfaction. That will help you to sympathise with me; for, if ever any one had

cause to be dissatisfied, I have. My power in the parish is a thing of the past ; Mrs. Farquhar meets me and beats me at every turn. I suppose you know that she has quarrelled with the Ebenezer man and is coming back to church with a whole flock of parishioners at her heels. What makes it so humiliating is that I was bringing them round one by one, and she knew it. She fights like Napoleon, by moving large masses, which is quite destructive of all the finer tactics of warfare. But I don't want to talk about my afflictions ; let us hear one of the many things that you have to say to me."

I observed that, to begin with, I should very much like to know why she had scorned the dog which I had been at such pains to select for her.

"More questions !" she exclaimed laughing. "I wish you would try to adopt some other style of conversation, Charley. I hate answering questions."

"And letters, too, it seems," I remarked.

"My father answered yours for me. I didn't scorn the little dog at all ; I was very sorry to be obliged to refuse him. But—well, I had a reason for that also."

“And also a reason that can’t be mentioned?”

“A reason that it would be embarrassing to mention, as I said before. And yet,” she added after a momentary silence, “I don’t know why I should allow myself to be embarrassed by it after all; perhaps you may as well be told. It was only that Mrs. Farquhar came to call one day, and said disagreeable things about our being so much together. What she says is of no great consequence, perhaps, but it made me rather angry at the time, and I was determined that she should have no excuse for doing it again.”

Maud delivered herself of this explanation in a perfectly unconcerned voice; but it seemed to me that a faint reflection of the pink sunset glow had found its way into her cheeks.

“So that’s why you wouldn’t have poor old Scamp,” I exclaimed. “Now I understand it all; and if you only knew what a weight you have lifted off my mind, you would wish you had spoken a little sooner. I left the poor little man up at Oxford, because I thought it would be unfair upon him to bring him into company where he was despised; but now I shall

send for him at once, and I shall be very much astonished if you don't fall in love with him at first sight. I suppose you won't consent to accept him yet; but I consider that he is your property, and I shall hand him over to you as soon as we get rid of Mrs. Farquhar. And that won't be a very long time to wait; because I shall slay her with my own hands, if she goes on behaving in this outrageous way."

Maud, with her chin supported by her hand, was gazing at the misty distance, and made no rejoinder for some minutes. "You ought not to speak against Mrs. Farquhar," she remarked at length; "she is quite devoted to you."

"I don't want her devotion," I returned ungratefully.

"You may want it some day;—though it is very uncertain whether you will keep it, I should think." And then, after another interval of silence, "You have been let into the family secret, I hear."

"Yes. Did you know of it all along?"

"I guessed what it must be; and then Mrs. Farquhar spoke about it quite openly. She thinks all will go smoothly now; her only fear is

that you may be Quixotic enough to hunt out the lost sheep and abdicate in his favour. She asked me whether I thought you were likely to be so irrational as to cut your own throat; but I told her I didn't know you sufficiently well to give an opinion. It was then that she began to make unpleasant speeches."

"I don't want to stand between father and son," I said, with a twinge of conscience, as I remembered how my enthusiasm in this matter had cooled down. "I made up my mind from the first that I would bring them together again if I could. Don't you think yourself that I ought?"

She did not answer at first; but presently she said slowly, "Yes; I think you ought."

"Then," said I, "you may be sure that I shall try."

"But I hope you won't succeed," she added.

"Why not?"

"Oh, one may wish one's friends to be heroic; but one is not bound to wish that they should be turned out into the cold."

"I shouldn't mind that a bit," I declared, "if you thought me heroic for doing it. Maud, there's nothing I wouldn't do to please you. I

care a great deal more for one word from you than for all the houses and lands in Norfolk."

"Won't you catch cold if you stand up to your knees in water much longer?" she asked, altogether disregarding this hyperbolical compliment.

"What can I do?" said I. "I'm afraid I couldn't get into the punt without upsetting it."

"I beg you will not attempt any such thing. But I see no reason why you should not return to the bank."

"And shout across the water to you? No, thank you; I prefer to stay where I am. Maud," I continued, resting my arms on the edge of the punt, and looking up into her face (for the mention of the circumstance that our names had been coupled together by Mrs. Farquhar had greatly emboldened me)—"Maud, do you know why I kept away from Thirlby at Easter?"

"I can't imagine," she replied, with something disagreeably like a quiver of suppressed laughter in her voice. "What can have been your motive? Did you withdraw into a sequestered nook in order to carry on your studies without danger of interruption?"

"No," I returned somewhat tartly; "I didn't.

I went larking about the country in a dog-cart with another fellow. After the way you had behaved about Scamp, I was sure you didn't care to see me, and I wasn't going to come home only to be made miserable. So I thought I would enjoy myself and forget you; only of course I couldn't; and—— But what is the use of my saying all this?" I broke off. "I believe you know it all; I believe you know everything, really."

"Know everything?" she repeated, turning round with raised eyebrows.

"I mean, everything that there is to know about me. You know that——" I came to a full stop here, checked by the thumping of my heart, and by the sinking sensation which always precedes a leap or a plunge. However, I conquered it at once, and ended my sentence in a perfectly unequivocal manner—"You know that I love you."

She made no reply, but sat perfectly motionless, with her head still turned away from me; and so long did this silence continue that at last I was obliged to repeat in a tone of entreaty, "Tell me, don't you?"

"I know you think so," she said quietly.

"Think so!" I cried—"think so! You might as well say that I *think* I am alive. If I can be sure of anything in the world, I am sure of my love for you. It began the very first day that I saw you; it has always been the same ever since, and it always will be the same as long as I live."

"I suppose people always say that when they are in love," Maud remarked, bending over the side of the boat, and drawing her fingers absently through the water. And I doubt whether she heard much of the eager asseverations which I proceeded to pour forth; for she jumped up abruptly, while I was in the midst of my harangue, and said it was time to go home. "Will you pull the punt to the bank, please, and let me get out?"

"Very well," I said; "but you will give me an answer before you go?"

"Let me land first." And presently she laid her hand lightly on my shoulder, and sprang ashore, saying calmly, "Good-night, Charley."

"And my answer?" said I.

She laughed as she looked down upon me from the bank. "You haven't asked me anything," she observed. "You have only been

making statements, and they don't require an answer."

"Then," I returned, "I will ask you something now. Maud, whatever you may say, you know that I love you. Do you?—can you——?"

"That's enough," she interrupted; "I don't want you to ask any more. Supposing—only you are not to suppose anything of the kind, please—that I had an inclination to—to feel in the way you mean, I should consider it an imperative duty to stifle that inclination."

"An imperative duty?" I echoed doubtfully, being unable to distinguish her features in the waning light, and having a painful suspicion that she was laughing at me.

"Oh, yes; just as you feel it your duty to seek out young Mr. Le Marchant and put him in your place, you know. Duty so often compels us to turn away from brilliant prospects, unfortunately."

By this time I had scrambled up the bank to her side, and was able to convince myself of the mortifying fact that she was positively and literally laughing. "I must say that I did not expect you to make fun of me!" I exclaimed wrathfully.

"I am not making fun of you, Charley," she answered; "or, at least, only a very little. But don't you think it is better not to be too serious over it? In a few years', or perhaps a few months' time, you won't look back upon it as having been a very serious matter yourself, and you mustn't be angry with me because I can see a little further into the future than you can. There is nothing wonderful in your thinking me perfection just now, because I happen to be the only girl of decent birth and education in the neighbourhood; but it would be very wonderful indeed if you continued to think so after meeting numbers of better-looking, better-dressed, and cleverer women—as you certainly must do before you are much older."

"That wonder will never take place," I declared firmly.

"We shall see. In the meantime, will you do me a small favour?"

"A thousand."

"You are too liberal; I only ask for one. It is that you will not refer to this subject again."

"That is absurd!" I exclaimed. "I am willing to do anything in reason, but I can't

perform impossibilities, and I don't think you ought to require them of me."

"Then you will drive me out of the county, that is all," she said, turning away. "The Savilles have asked me to go and stay with them; but I meant to decline, because I thought I should have a pleasant summer here, now that you and George Warren have come back, and very likely it will be the last that we shall spend together. Now, however, I shall be obliged to go, though it will be very inconvenient in many ways."

This threat brought me down on my knees, so to speak, at once. Sooner than that Maud should go away I was ready to consent to anything—almost anything. I promised to submit; all I entreated was that she would give me just one word of hope to keep me going, and that at least she would believe in the sincerity of my love. If she could not give me credit for constancy, I was sorry for it; only time could convince her that she was wronging me there. As for me, I knew that I could never change. "Whether you care for me or whether you forget me, Maud, it will always be just the same. There may be numbers of women in the world superior to you, as you

say, but it is quite certain that I shall never think so ; and I will not give up the hope of winning you some day until I find that you love another man."

I did not obtain much from her in return for a great many vows such as these ; but she did not refuse to listen to me, and that, I thought, was a good sign. "It is agreed, then," she said at last, "that you are not to speak like this again."

"Until when?"

"Until—until—oh, I don't know. Until I give you leave."

"But that may be never," I said dolorously.

"It may be never," she agreed, smiling. "Still, while there is life there is hope ; and as you mean never to change, it won't matter if you have to wait some little time."

"You don't forbid me to hope, then?" I cried eagerly.

She did not answer, but she did not withdraw her hand, of which I had managed to gain possession, and I repeated my appeal—"You don't forbid me to hope?"

I suppose that neither she nor I can have had

all our faculties about us at that moment ; otherwise we must surely have heard footsteps drawing near. Certain it is that we were both thrown into the most extreme discomfiture when my uncle's voice, close to my ear, said : " I don't know whether you are aware, Charley, that it is half-past eight o'clock, and that dinner is over. My mother has sent me out to look for you, preparatory to giving orders for having the Broad dragged." And I believe that it was to spare our blushes that the dear old fellow pretended only at that moment to recognise Maud. " Bless me ! can that be Miss Dennison ? " he ejaculated. " My dear young lady, your father will be in a fine fright ! You must allow us to see you home. On these long evenings one is apt to forget to look at one's watch."

I was too dumbfounded to speak, for I was sure that my uncle could not have helped overhearing my last words ; but Maud, who should have found the situation even more awkward than I did, recovered herself with feminine rapidity.

" My father won't feel anxious, Mr. Le Marchant," she said, " because he has gone to Norwich

to see the Bishop. And you must not think of seeing me home, thank you ; I am quite accustomed to walking about by myself. It is much more important that you should take Charley back, and set Mrs. Farquhar's mind at rest."

My uncle, however, would take no refusal. His old-fashioned ideas of courtesy rendered it absolutely imperative upon him to escort belated ladies to their own door, and he was not the man to allow any inconvenience attendant upon walking through muddy copses and lanes in thin evening shoes to deter him from the execution of his duty. Presently, therefore, Miss Dennison set off homewards under efficient protection, she and my uncle beguiling the way with bland conversation, while I remained silent, and wondered what they were thinking about all the time. Probably neither of them was very sorry when the Rectory was reached ; but they kept up appearances in a highly creditable manner to the last moment, and parted with the usual interchange of polite speeches.

When we had said good-night, and had turned our faces towards the Hall, my uncle did not take my arm, as it was his general custom to do

when we were alone ; and I knew that he was displeased with me, though he said nothing. Perhaps he was waiting for me to speak first. However, I thought I would leave it to him to break the ice ; and, after a while, he did so in a manner which rather startled me.

“ Charley,” he said, “ this will never do. I am sorry to have to say it ; but I must say that I am disappointed in you.”

“ What do you mean ? ” I asked.

“ I owe you an apology for having played the eavesdropper,” he went on, without noticing my interruption ; “ but I hope you know that I should never do such a thing intentionally.”

I said I was quite sure of that.

“ No ; I should never have done it intentionally,” he repeated ; “ and indeed I caught no more than two or three words. Such as they were, though, there was no misunderstanding them, and I am afraid I must take it that, when I came up, you were in the act of making Miss Dennison an offer of marriage.”

“ It wasn’t exactly that,” I murmured.

“ Not an offer of marriage ? Then, may I inquire what it was ? ”

"It was a—a sort of a—oh, *you* know," I answered, finding accurate definition quite beyond me. "I didn't say a word about marriage; we never got as far as that; and of course I should have had no right to talk about marrying. One can't marry upon twopence halfpenny a year."

"And do you think," asked my uncle, "that it is a gentlemanlike or an honourable thing to speak to a girl of love when you are not able to speak to her of marriage?"

I answered, somewhat confusedly, that I had not thought of the matter in that way.

"That is exactly what I complain of," he rejoined; "you ought to have thought of it. I don't know what answer Miss Dennison may have given you——"

"She gave me no answer at all. That is to say, she only told me not to do it again."

"I am very glad to hear it. Still, it is no thanks to you that she has been preserved from placing herself in a false position. Even as it is I don't see how she is to meet you again without great discomfort."

"But it is agreed that I am to say no more about it for the present."

"Oh!—that is agreed?"

"Yes. And surely," I went on in a somewhat injured tone, "you don't object to her personally. You wouldn't mind my looking forward to marrying her some day. You don't want me to go in for an heiress, or anything of that kind."

"My dear fellow, I am thinking of her just now, not of you. No; I have not the smallest objection to Miss Maud; on the contrary, I think that she is a very charming young lady, and that the man who wins her will be a particularly lucky man. Only, as you will not be either old enough or rich enough to think of marrying for some years to come, I doubt whether you will be that man; and therefore I say that it was a thoughtless and selfish thing to try and get an avowal out of her. Do I understand you to say that she is perfectly free?"

"Perfectly and absolutely. She gave me nothing approaching to a promise."

"Then," said my uncle, after a few minutes of silence, "I dare say we may be able to save her from further annoyance. I must think it over."

"But I don't consider *myself* free," I observed.

"I told her that I should marry her or nobody, and I mean to keep my word."

"I have nothing to say against that; that is a matter which concerns you alone. All I wish to impress upon you is, that you should hold your peace until you have something besides fidelity to offer."

"Well, I suppose you are right," I said. "I admit that I ought not to have spoken—only I couldn't help it."

"Ah, I think you could have helped it, if you had thought a little more of her and less of yourself, Charley," answered my uncle. He added, very characteristically, "Nevertheless, it is difficult for an old man to judge a young one justly. I am afraid I can't retract the meaning of anything that I have said; but perhaps the words I used may have been too harsh. If they were I beg your pardon."

At the time I thought he had been decidedly too hard upon me. I don't think so now; but perhaps that may be because I am no longer young myself.



CHAPTER X.

GEORGE SUCCOURS BEAUTY IN DISTRESS.

EARLY the next day my uncle mounted his horse and rode away for some destination unknown, leaving a message to the effect that he would probably not be back for luncheon. It was very seldom that he absented himself from that meal, except when called away on magisterial business ; and upon this occasion both Mrs. Farquhar and I were led to conclude that there was something in the wind. That that something was not unconnected with the discovery that had been made on the previous evening seemed to me more than probable ; but Mrs. Farquhar, who was without that clue to the general situation, and who was afflicted with one of those restless minds which are for ever probing into the causes of things, exhausted herself in conjectures, and plied me with abrupt queries, until I began to fear that,

if she did not extract my secret from me, she would at least find out that I had a secret to be extracted—which would be very nearly as bad.

To escape from this danger I left the house and walked down to the woods in search of Bunce, whom I found, as I had expected to do, in a clearing, where a number of hen-coops had been set up for the young pheasants. Bunce, with his hands in the pockets of his old velveteen coat, was bending anxiously over some of the more delicate of his nurslings ; and he said that that there bending and stooping was the very doose and all for the lumbagy ; also that the rearing of young birds was enough to break a man's heart, let alone his back. He further remarked that some men was ignorant of their business, and a many was too lazy to attend to it ; but that his motter was, Do your dooty, no matter what it costs you. If you didn't get no thanks, you should have bore in mind, if you was a sensible man, that you hadn't ought for to have expected none ; such being the way of the world. He proceeded, with his usual modesty, to insinuate that he was himself the only keeper worthy to be so called in the county ; after which he

straightened himself up and made a slow examination of me from head to foot, as though to estimate the probability of my achieving a success approaching his in my own calling in life.

"So they're a-goin' to put you into the furrin ministerial business, I hear, Mr. Chawls," said he.

I replied that I was going into the diplomatic service, if that was what he meant.

"Ah! Well, I ain't seen no Ambassadors, not as I can call to mind; but I seen some o' them Colony Governors, with a deal o' gold lace about 'em and their cocked hats under their arms. Shouldn't ha' knowed 'em from Lord Mayor's flunkeys myself. But there! it takes all kinds o' folks to make up a world, as they say. I'd rather ha' heard you was to wear Her Majesty's uniform, Mr. Chawls."

"Well, I am going to wear Her Majesty's uniform, Bunce."

"So you are, sir, to be sure. Though 'tis more like a livery, by my way o' thinking. And how long might you be likely to stick to that trade, sir, if I may ask?"

"Upon my word, I don't know," I answered.
"All my life, I dare say."

Bunce shook his head. "Tain't for me to speak," said he; "but accordin' to my notions, sir, your place is at Thirlby, and not in furrin parts. Squire he'll be that lonely when you're gone, I don't know what we're to do with him. He do get terrible low at times—don't seem to take what I call a interest in things. What does he want to send you off out o' sight for? 'Tis my belief as that there old woman's at the bottom of it, with her everlastin'-schemes and minoovers. Take care as she don't play you some dirty trick, sir, soon as your back's turned. Clear enough it is to me what she's a-drivin' at, and if she could get her own way, you'd never have a acre o' this here property to call your own, Mr. Chawls."

"I know what you mean, Bunce," I said; "but you're wrong. I am getting rather tired of hearing my chances of inheriting this property talked about; but at the present moment Mrs. Farquhar is quite as anxious that I should get the place as you can be, and a great deal more so than I am myself—I don't mind telling you that much."

"So you may think, sir; so you may think.

But Lord love you ! you don't understand the plaguy ways o' women yet ; and she's a deep one, she is ! I wouldn't trust her no further than I could see her—no ; nor yet as fur ! And as for not bein' anxious to get Thirlby, why, that's a kind o' foolishness as you'll find yourself grow out of wonderful quick, sir. There's worse things in this wicked world than a fine old house and a nice estate and a good head o' game and——”

“And an unrivalled gamekeeper to look after it, eh ?”

“Many a true word, sir, is spoke in jest,” remarked Bunce, sententiously. “Squire knows what these here coverts is now, and what they was twenty years ago ; though he never cared much for sport hisself. And here he comes. Now, I'd lay half-a-crown to a sixpence he don't so much as ask a question about them young birds.”

Bunce would have won his bet, if he had found a taker ; for my uncle, who presently joined us, contented himself with inquiring civilly after Mrs. Bunce's health—as if Mrs. Bunce had ever been known to be anything but

well!—and led me away without even glancing at his pheasants.

“I have been to lunch with the Warrens, Charley,” he said, as soon as we were beyond the range of Bunce’s sharp ears, “and I am glad to say that I have concluded an arrangement which I hope you will think satisfactory. I wrote to you, as you may remember, some time ago that I doubted whether it would be worth your while to return to Oxford and take your degree; and what happened yesterday quite decided me to carry out a plan which I had already been turning over in my mind and to send you abroad for a year or thereabouts. Before you can enter the diplomatic service you will have to pass an examination in modern languages and a few other subjects, which is not a very hard one, I believe, but which will require a certain amount of reading up; and I fancied that you would get through this necessary work more profitably as well as more pleasantly if you were travelling with a tutor——”

“A tutor!” I interrupted, in dismay; for the truth was that this proposition appeared to

me to cast a cruel slight upon the dignity of my years.

"A coach, if you prefer the term—some one to read with you. I did not mean to suggest that he should take a birch in his portmanteau. Well; it occurred to me that George Warren might be willing to see something of foreign lands before settling down to his profession; so I rode over this morning and laid my proposal before him and his father. They were both very ready to agree to it; only George had some conscientious scruples on the score of his teaching capacities, which I made so bold as to overrule. Now, what do you think?"

"Oh, if it's only old George——" I said. "I suppose it is quite decided that I am to go, in any case?"

"Well, yes; unless you can bring forward some very good reason for your remaining in England. And even then," added my uncle with a smile, "I am afraid I should have to drive you out of Norfolk for some time to come. I deplore the necessity, and so, no doubt, do you; but it exists, and we can't escape from it."

Under these circumstances, I thought I might as well give a gracious assent. In the course of the night and morning I had considered my position, and had found fair ground for hope in the fact that Maud had not said No; which she might so easily have done, if she had not contemplated saying Yes at some future date.

During the intervening period it would perhaps be rather to my advantage that I should keep myself out of sight. Moreover, since it appeared that I was to be allowed no choice in the matter, I felt entitled, without self-reproach, to admit the thought that it would not be bad fun to knock about the Continent of Europe with so docile and pliant a companion as I knew that George would prove. What I did not quite anticipate was my uncle's announcement that we were to start in three days' time. I pleaded for a little longer delay; but he was inexorable; and when he asked me why I wanted to put off the evil day, I had no answer to give.

Maud must have understood perfectly well the cause of my forcible removal from the

scene ; but she expressed her surprise and regret, when we met, as naturally as if she had never in her life sat in a punt among the reeds of Thirlby Broad, and she and my uncle bore themselves towards one another with so elaborate a show of innocent unconsciousness, that I could hardly watch them together and keep my countenance. Mrs. Farquhar, on the other hand, neither understood nor approved of the hasty decision which had been arrived at, and gave it as her opinion that Bernard had just taken leave of his senses. Did anybody ever hear of such a thing as removing a young man from the University in the midst of his career, and throwing him headlong among all the temptations and dangers of those dark Popish lands ! She protested against such madness with all the power of her tongue up to the end ; and I greatly fear that my poor uncle had a bad time of it with her after we were gone.

At the last moment I transgressed so far as to whisper impressively to Maud, like Charles I. to Bishop Juxon, "Remember !" My exact meaning may not have been more clear to her than that of the ill-fated King has been to historians ;

nor, for that matter, did I know very well myself what I meant; but the fact was that I had not the opportunity to say more than one word, and this seemed as comprehensive a one as could be chosen. She smiled very slightly, but did not favour me with any other response, verbal or tacit; and so we parted.

I can see her now as I saw her then, standing upon the steps at Thirlby in the morning sunshine, while I scramble up into the dog-cart, in which George has already taken his place; I can see the Rector, who has just arrived in a desperate hurry, as usual, mopping his forehead with a brilliant silk pocket-handkerchief; and my uncle, looking up at me a little sadly; and Mrs. Farquhar with her cap adrift, owing to natural agitation; and the impassive Cooper in the background. From the gates of the stable-yard hard by, Bunce and half-a-dozen other friends of humbler position grin their farewells and their wishes for a pleasant journey and a speedy return. It is difficult to believe that this happened more than thirty years ago, and that the place which once knew all those kindly faces so well knows them no more.

Thirty years ago travelling abroad was not the commonplace, matter-of-fact sort of business that it is to-day. Railways there were; but they were few in number, and did not extend very far south; national types were more strongly marked, or were at any rate more perceptible to the tourist; the tourist himself was a person of distinct individuality, with whom, as he wended his leisurely way, people stopped to speak, instead of being, as he is now, one of a horde, whom they stand aside to let pass; inns were good or bad, cheap or dear, as the case might be; they were not all bad, nor all dear; coffee was still to be had in France, good manners had not yet gone out of fashion in Italy, nor honesty in Switzerland. In other words, I was twenty years of age in the middle of the present century; whereas the century and I are both becoming a little *passés* now. I say that the Continent was a far pleasanter place to wander over in the year 1852 than it is in 1883, and I don't care who maintains the contrary. As for my companion and me, we set foot upon it at Calais with sensations of wonder and delight such as I cannot conceive any young man of the present day capable of ex-

periencing. Everything was new to us ; and in search of further novelty we had only to move where we pleased, and as far as we pleased, east, west, or south ; for our instructions had been of a vague and liberal order. The only restriction laid upon us bore reference to Paris, in which gay city my uncle considered that a stay of three or four weeks at the outside would be enough for all legitimate purposes ; and I suppose that was why we headed for Paris at once, and remained there to the last day of our permitted month.

At that season of the year Paris was, of course, empty, socially speaking ; but its attractions were not lessened, so far as we were concerned, by the absence of the fashionable world. The streets were full of people, whose costume and gestures afforded us endless merriment ; in the theatres, whither we repaired on most nights in order to improve our knowledge of the language, were crowds sufficient to render the air almost unbreathable ; the *cafés* were thronged with noisy politicians, who harangued for or against the tottering Republic, and whose several views reached us by fragments above the clatter of the dominoes and the click of the billiard-balls. Once, while we

were sitting on the Boulevard des Italiens, an obliging neighbour pointed out to us General Cavaignac, striding by with his head in the air; and once, from our window, we saw the Prince-President driving past in an open carriage, looking gloomy and impenetrable as usual. He was not so fortunate as to earn our approbation, I remember, in the matter of personal appearance. "There is a good deal more of the owl than the eagle about *him*," George said contemptuously. "He may be a first-rate conspirator; but if he attempts to play the game of dictatorship over this disrespectful nation, he'll get that melancholy head of his chopped off as sure as he's born!"

We were domiciled in the Rue Louis-le-Grand, in a house which was subsequently razed to the ground, together with many others, during the piping times when Baron Haussmann was Prefect of the Seine, and when the potentate whose fate George had so rashly forecast had become a full-fledged eagle, with no fear of the Germanic variety of the species before his eyes. The street was narrow, as most Parisian streets were then; but it was a lively one; and I spent a good deal

of the time in looking out of the window which I ought to have employed in studying Wheaton's "International Law," Adam Smith's "Wealth of Nations," and Hallam's "Constitutional History," all which works were spread out invitingly for me on the table every morning by George, who was more successful in getting up subjects himself than in inducing me to follow his example. "You will be plucked to a dead certainty!" he would sigh sometimes; but I assured him that there was no cause for alarm, and that, when the critical moment drew nearer, I should throw myself into my work, and accomplish what I had to do; though not after his fashion. Some people, I pointed out, overcame obstacles by sapping and mining; others annihilated them by a *coup de main*—he belonged to the former, I to the latter class. I don't know whether he was convinced by this reasoning; but doubtless his common sense showed him the uselessness of arguing against it; for, in truth, he had no authority over me. All he stipulated for was that we should at least go through the form of reading for a few hours every morning; and to this I could not reasonably object. In the afternoons and evenings

we wandered abroad, studying Parisian life and manners under various aspects.

Wherever we went—and chance took us into some queer places—I was haunted by a vague expectation of encountering my castaway cousin. That I should come across him sooner or later, in Paris or elsewhere, I was convinced; and as often as I saw a seedy out-at-elbows Englishman I began scanning his features eagerly in the effort to trace in them some resemblance to those of my uncle. With a few of these disreputable persons I made some excuse to scrape acquaintance, and I remember in particular one raffish-looking half-tipsy youth whom we chanced upon at a *café chantant*, and who responded to my advances with the utmost cordiality. I really thought he had quite a Le Marchant sort of look about the eyes and mouth, and the trifling detail of his being at least a dozen years too young did not strike me at the moment. Only after he had begun to scatter his h's about in a reckless manner was I reluctantly forced to the conclusion that he could not be the man of whom I was in search. It then seemed to be about time to shake him off, and I accordingly signalled to

George to get up ; but my friend would not be shaken off at all, accompanied us down the Champs Elysées, addressing me as "ole feller" in a loud voice, and finally requested the loan of twenty francs ; at which price I was glad to be rid of him.

When he had stumbled away into the darkness George ventured on a mild remonstrance. "What possesses you to speak to these cads, Charley ? One would think you had some private reasons for forcing your company upon every drunken loafer within reach."

I replied that I had such reasons, and proceeded to explain what they were, while George plodded along beside me and listened in silence. He knew the whole story of my uncle's calamity—indeed, it appeared to me that everybody in Norfolk, except myself, had always been acquainted with it—and he did not express any surprise at the quest which I had undertaken, only a sort of tacit disapproval.

"And when you have got him, what will you do with him ?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Make friends with him, I suppose."

“Yes ; and then ?”

“Oh, well, then I must try to arrange a meeting between him and my uncle.”

“I see.”

“You don’t seem very enthusiastic about my plan,” I remarked, with some impatience.

“Well—I don’t know, I’m sure,” said George musingly. “It’s a noble project, no doubt ; but then, you know, I am one of those commonplace people who can’t, as a rule, appreciate noble projects. I think, if I were in your place, I should let well alone.”

“If things were well as they are, I would let them alone,” I answered ; “but they are not. They are well for me, of course ; but one isn’t to consider one’s own interests above and before everything. I should have thought you would have understood that. Maud did at once. She quite agreed with me that it was my duty to find out this unfortunate fellow and let him have another chance—though she acknowledged that she hoped I should not succeed.”

“Miss Dennison,” said George, “takes the romantic view of the case ; and that is quite right, and what one would wish her to do. She

has a noble and generous nature herself; she would like to be able to think that you too were generous and willing to sacrifice your prospects rather than be partner—sleeping partner even—in an injustice. And yet, you see, she doesn't go the extreme length of wishing you success; she wants you to have the glory of being disinterested, but not the inconvenience. As for me, I am quite content to follow her lead. By all means go on looking for your cousin;—only I hope you won't find him. And indeed I don't think you will."

"That remains to be seen," I remarked.

"But supposing that, by some queer chance, you should find him," pursued George, "you will then, as you say, have to lead him home to Mr. Le Marchant, who is not likely either to thank you or to change his mind at your suggestion; and again, supposing that he does change his mind, the odds are that the son will turn out to be altogether irreclaimable, and then there will be another quarrel and another scandal; and again, supposing that all goes smoothly, that the son behaves himself, and that the father is delighted to have him back again and consents

to cut you adrift—then what will you have left to marry upon? I really do think that you had better leave well alone.”

I thought this rather cynical of George; but, to tell the truth, I was not very disconsolate at my failure to discover Harry in Paris. If he chose to turn up, well and good, and I should then, I hoped, know how to do my duty; but, after all, I had not come abroad to seek for him.

When summer was fading into autumn we set our faces towards the south, journeying by rail as far as the train would take us—which, if I remember rightly, was not beyond Lyons—and thence dawdling on to the Mediterranean, stopping at places where nobody dreams of passing a night now, and enjoying the colour, the picturesque out-door life, the wines and the songs of windy Provence as Sterne and the old travellers used to enjoy them, and as no traveller will ever enjoy them again. At Nice we made another long halt, and it was not until the last days of October that we struck a bargain with a *vetturino*, who was to take us by way of the Cornice road to Genoa, whence we proposed to travel by easy stages towards Rome.

I see by my Bradshaw that a railway now runs through that lovely district, and I am told by many friends that the little white villages which used to be dotted along the coast-line are now more or less lively watering-places, with the conventional big hotels and the usual winter population of invalids and idlers. I should doubt whether these things can be an improvement ; but to me personally it is of no consequence. I have never revisited the Riviera, and I never shall. In the year 1852, when George Warren and I drove along its shores in the brilliant autumn sunshine, and looked down upon "bays the peacock's neck in hue," where bare-legged fishermen sat mending their nets, or out upon distant headlands clothed with the silvery olive, I thought to myself that I would return thither on my wedding-trip ; but circumstances interfered with the realisation of this scheme, and now I should be very sorry to destroy a happy memory by a stupid attempt to refresh it.

It was on the evening of the second day, I think, that we drew near to the little town of Alassio, where it was intended that we should spend the night. As we entered the dim, narrow

street, it became evident that the place was in a state of commotion. Above the rattle of our wheels and the clatter of our horses' hoofs we could distinguish a confused din of shouts and oaths and cracking of whips, which grew clearer presently, when our driver pulled up, being unable to advance further on account of the crowd of gesticulating inhabitants which blocked the way. We both stood up and looked over the heads of the excited population. In front of the inn were drawn up two travelling carriages, facing in opposite directions, and each with its four horses harnessed; but the four postillions had dismounted, and were dancing round one another in the vacant space between the two vehicles, flourishing their whips, and exchanging threats of a most terrible and blood-curdling nature.

"What is all the row about?" George inquired of our *vetturino*, who shrugged his shoulders and said, "It is a difficulty about the horses. They both want to get on, and there are only four fresh beasts to be had; so they are quarrelling. It often happens like that—*che vuole?*"

"Did you ever see such a set of capering

fools !” exclaimed George, who had a fine British disdain for all foreign methods of carrying on hostilities. “Why can’t they set to work with their fists, if they mean fighting? Upon my word, I’ve a great mind to go and show them the way. I don’t suppose they do mean fighting at all, though.”

However, he did them an injustice there. Even while he spoke, a whip-lash, either by accident or intention, fell right across the cheek of one of the postillions ; and this was the signal for a general onslaught. Immediately there was a yell and a screech, and in another moment the whole four of them were locked together in a struggling mass, making free use of their whips, and also, so far as one could see through the cloud of dust that they kicked up, of their nails and teeth. The riderless horses began to plunge ; the occupants of the further carriage bundled out on to the road in affright ; only, in the other one, a lady, whose back was towards us, sat looking on at the fray with perfect composure and indifference, paying no attention to her courier and maid, both of whom had jumped down and were entreating her to do likewise.

"By Jove! she's a cool hand," I said admiringly. "An Englishwoman evidently. Oughtn't we to go and offer to help her?"

George's insular reserve asserted itself at once. "Oh, I think we had better not interfere," he answered; "she might not like it. I'm quite game to go and separate those lunatics, though, if you choose."

But I had an inquisitive desire to see the lady's face, and at that time of my life I was seldom afflicted with shyness. I stepped up to the side of the carriage, took off my wideawake with my best bow, and asked whether I could be of any assistance. "Had you not better get out?" I said. "Nobody is holding your horses, you know."

She turned her head, and took a slow survey of my humble person which disconcerted me a little. "Thank you," she answered in a cool, pleasant voice; "but my horses are much too tired to run away. The other people have got the fresh ones, unfortunately. No; I don't know that you can be of any use. Unless," she added as an afterthought, "you would knock one of those men down; then we should be two to one,

which ought to give us a better chance. Or perhaps your friend would like to do it; he seems to be eager for the battle."

These last words, spoken in a somewhat louder key, caught the ear of George, who was much more at home in the art of self-defence than in that of making polite speeches. He waited for no second hint; and in the twinkling of an eye one of the postillions was sprawling on his back, with the soles of his huge boots in the air.

"Oh, dear me!" exclaimed the lady in great vexation, "he has knocked down the wrong man! How very stupid of him! Now we are done for."

There was no doubt about that. In the midst of the uproar aroused by George's unlucky intervention the enemy quietly vacated the field. The dusty post-boys hoisted themselves into their saddles; the travellers resumed their seats; and presently the rival carriage rolled away towards Oneglia and San Remo, the crowd falling back on either side to give it passage. Meanwhile the guardians of law and order, who had hitherto kept modestly in the background, came forward in the shape of two *carabinieri*. These made a prompt capture of George, and were

leading him away—presumably to the lock-up—when the unknown lady stopped them with an imperious gesture. She said a few rapid words to them in Italian, the sense of which I was unable to catch, but which had the effect of causing them at once to relinquish their prisoner. Then she turned to George, who was looking very angry and crestfallen.

“I have told these men that I am on my way to Turin, and that I shall see his Majesty there—which is true,” she said. “I also told them that you were a personage of distinction—which is probably not true, but that can’t be helped—and that they would certainly be put to death if they meddled with you. Perhaps you had better give them some money, though. Not too much; ten *lire* each will be ample.” She added, as she stepped out of her carriage, “You should not be so hasty. If you had taken the trouble to ask me which were my postillions, you would have saved your money, and I might have been able to continue my journey.”

“I am very sorry,” said George, half-laughing, half-indignant.

She smiled. “Oh,” said she, “you meant

well ; and after all, it does not much matter. It is only spending a night here ; and I suppose they can give me rooms." With which she marched into the inn, followed by her courier and maid, leaving us to arrange matters with the *carabinieri* and the bruised postillion, the latter of whom was naturally much annoyed at the treatment he had received, and assessed his injuries at two napoleons.

"What an extraordinary woman !" ejaculated George, as we entered the dark, musty-smelling inn, after discharging the various claims made upon us ; "what a very extraordinary woman !"

"She certainly is not ordinary," I agreed ; "but I don't know that she is any the worse for that. I wonder who she is. Did you notice that she said she was going to see the King of Sardinia ?"

"She said she would see him at Turin ; but then so might you or I, you know—in the street," observed the cautious George. "I didn't much like the look of her myself," he added.

"I am quite certain that she is a lady," said I, decisively ; "one could tell that at once by

her voice. And I must say that I did rather like the look of her."

"Well—I don't know, I'm sure. She has cost me a lot of money, and all the skin off my knuckles," observed George, ruefully. "I don't care if I never see her again."

I said I should be very much disappointed if we didn't see her again, and added that I was determined at least to find out who she was before she left.

I very soon obtained the desired information, for in about a quarter of an hour the courier whom we had seen below appeared at our door, and handed me a card bearing the name of Lady Constance Milner, beneath which was scribbled in pencil, *will be glad to see Mr. Maxwell and Mr. Warren at dinner at seven o'clock, and begs that they will not trouble to dress.*

"H'm! it hasn't taken her long to find out who *we* are, anyhow," growled George. "She might have told the fellow to wait for 'an answer, I think. Suppose you write her a line to say you're sorry we can't go."

I replied that I should certainly not do anything of the kind. Lady Constance undoubtedly

meant to be civil, and it was no fault of hers if George had barked his knuckles while falling upon her friends, instead of her enemies. Of course he could do as he liked ; but I meant to dine with her.

At seven o'clock, accordingly, I and my reluctant companion descended to the first floor, and were shown into a large bare apartment, with a stone floor, and walls painted in rude frescoes. Our entertainer rose from her chair by the window to receive us. She was a fair-haired woman, extremely tall, and holding herself in such a manner as to show every inch of her height. In the carriage she had not struck me as being young ; but I saw now that her age could not much exceed five or six-and-twenty. She had a slight natural droop of the eyelids, and also about the corners of the eyebrows, which gave the upper part of her face a somewhat supercilious expression ; but this was contradicted by her mouth, which was rather large, and which wore a frank, bold smile. One noticed these details before asking one's self whether she was handsome or not. Probably nine people out of ten would have called her so, although she had not much beauty of feature. What she had was

an air of distinction, an admirable figure, and a travelling-dress which fitted her like a glove.

"Please sit down," she said; "I thought, as we are the only people in the inn, we might as well dine together. I can't offer you a good dinner, of course; still, you will fare a little better with me than you would have done alone; for my courier Antonio is a universal genius, and I have sent him down to the kitchen to see what he can do. He found out your names for me; but I don't know which is which. Is Mr. Warren the one who gave my postillion the black eye? Ah! I thought so. You are both of you at Oxford or Cambridge, I suppose?"

Her manner was a trifle patronising; she implied a little too clearly, perhaps, that our names and history were matters of the most complete indifference to her; yet I did not feel offended. It was evidently natural to her to talk like that; there was no affectation in her good-humoured nonchalance; and if she did not care about cultivating our acquaintance, neither were we so very anxious to cultivate hers. Chance had thrown us together for one evening, and there was no reason why we should not get what

amusement we could out of that chance, without committing ourselves in any way with regard to future relations. I took her civilities as I supposed that she intended them to be taken, and perhaps that was why she and I got on swimmingly together during the dinner, which amply justified her boast of Antonio's skill.

George, on the other hand, did not get on with her at all. As a general thing, George disliked and distrusted odd people. Oddity, in his eyes, was *prima facie* evidence of a lack of respectability; and respectability was his idol. Besides, as he told me afterwards, he had an instinctive feeling that this woman was dangerous; and when I inquired "Dangerous in what way?" he replied that he didn't know, but that he maintained his opinion. While dinner was going on he scarcely spoke at all, keeping his eyes fixed upon his plate, and devoting himself chiefly to the staying of a healthy appetite. Once I saw Lady Constance give him a long look—such a look as she had honoured me with when I had first accosted her—but that appeared to satisfy any curiosity that she may have felt as to my friend; for she took no further notice of him,

except once, until the time came for her to wish him good-night.

Before that time she had heard a good deal about me and my belongings. She inquired whether my uncle was a brother of General Le Marchant's, whom she said that she knew slightly; she gratified my vanity by remembering perfectly well that I had been Captain of the Boats at Eton; she found out that we proposed to spend the winter among the cities of Southern Italy, and expressed a gracious hope that we might meet at Naples, whither she herself was bound. When I told her that I was destined ere long to enter diplomacy, she became more interested. "It is an amusing game," she said; "perhaps as amusing a game as there is. Only, to enjoy it, you should take it up as an amateur; the professional people are tied hand and foot with red tape, and generally get sick of their trade before they have learnt it. I know something of diplomacy from their point of view; for my brother is Minister at one of the German Courts, and my husband was in the service at one time."

"And has he given it up?—your husband, I mean," I inquired.

"He has given everything up ; he is dead," she answered quietly.

I felt myself becoming hot all over. "I—I beg your pardon," I murmured.

"Don't mind me," she answered ; "you couldn't be expected to know that I was a widow, and mistakes of that kind are a great deal more disagreeable for the person who makes them than for the person about whom they are made. Still, if you are going to be a diplomatist, you will have to acquire the art of conversation. I'll make you a present of an excellent rule in rhyme ;

"If you your lips would keep from slips,

Five things observe with care :

To whom you speak, OF whom you speak,

And HOW, and WHEN, and WHERE.

Mr. Warren would probably suggest as an amendment, 'Never speak at all ;' but we can't be all Trappists."

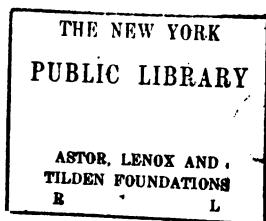
This was the one occasion upon which she addressed herself to George, who replied that he thought it a very good plan not to speak, unless you had something to say.

Very soon after this we took our leave, or, to

speaking more truthfully, received our dismissal. Whether Lady Constance Milner was a great lady, who was accustomed to be surrounded by obedient vassals, or whether it was only that she considered us to be very little people, I had, of course, no means of telling; but she certainly treated us very much as a good-natured, easy-going sovereign might be expected to treat her subjects, and, when she had had enough of us, sent us away without any ceremony.

"Good-night and good-bye," she said; "for I shall probably have started before you are up to-morrow morning. If you should find yourself at Naples or Palermo in the early part of the winter, we may, perhaps, meet again, and I hope you will call upon me."

With these last words she turned away, and resumed the chair by the window, where she had been sitting when we made our entrance, and Antonio, a grave black-bearded functionary, held the door open and bowed us out.



END OF VOL. I.

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